

# HUMAN SMOKE

## A collage of villainy

*Human Smoke*,  
Nicholson Baker  
London: Simon & Schuster, 2008

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**Review by Don Milligan, June 18, 2008**

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Nicholson Baker's new book, *Human Smoke*, is a collage of villainy. He has assembled 527 pages of quotations, reportage, and notes, which demonstrate the brutality and racism of the leaders of the liberal democracies through the first half of the twentieth century. Although this dismal reckoning is heavily reliant upon memoirs and newspaper stories there is little reason to doubt the fundamental accuracy of Baker's impression.

Winston Churchill and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were anti-Semites, the fledgling Royal Air Force earned its wings by bombing and machine gunning tribesmen in various parts of the British Empire, and with the collapse of the currency in Weimar Germany there was a collapse of values: "Berlin became a Babylon: 'Every high school boy wanted to earn some money, and in the dimly lit bars one might see government officials and men of the world of finance tenderly courting drunken sailors without any shame.'"<sup>1</sup> What is more, Winston Churchill and the Conservatives used the Zinoviev Letter to destroy the first Labour government;<sup>2</sup> British imperial authorities frequently

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<sup>1</sup> Here Nicholson Baker is citing Stefan Zweig's familiar depiction of homosexual prostitution as the harbinger of the decay and disintegration of the Weimar Republic. *Human Smoke*, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> The Zinoviev Letter was allegedly from Grigori Zinoviev, President of the Communist International, to Arthur MacManus of the Central Committee of

harassed and imprisoned Gandhi; Winston Churchill admired Mussolini and hated pacifists; during the opening of the *Devil's decade* Herbert Hoover and his Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, protected American interests in China while ignoring the activities of the Empire of Japan as its forces machine gunned and bombed the citizens of Shanghai;<sup>3</sup> armaments salesmen and manufacturers made millions; and, the misconception, common among both Jews and Gentiles that Hitler would 'put some water in his wine' was retailed by all and sundry. In the event, the Reichstag went up in flames, the Brown Shirts started burning books, and the pogrom to end all pogroms began; the democracies stood idly by while the Spanish Republic was throttled and David Lloyd George opined that the Nazis were preferable to the dangers of communism. It was as Auden said a low, dishonest decade:

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-Second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:<sup>4</sup>

Nicholson Baker has decided to remind us of all this by assembling a catalogue of mendacity, wickedness, bad faith, and criminal indifference. Threading through this sorry tale are accounts of the sterling efforts of pacifists in confronting the militarists and warmongers with the necessity of reason and compassion. However, the pacifist hope that their

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the Communist Party of Great Britain. It purportedly discussed plans for widespread revolutionary activity in Britain, including agitation within the army and navy. The letter was published by the *Daily Mail* four days before the General Election of 1924 and is thought to have played an important part in the Conservative victory. It has now been established that the letter was forged by members of the SIS (British Secret Intelligence Service) who wanted to assist in the defeat of the first Labour administration.

<sup>3</sup> The devil's decade: 1930s. See Claud Cockburn, *The Devil's Decade*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> The first five lines of W. H. Auden's poem: 'September 1, 1939'.

opposition to the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles would guarantee them a sympathetic hearing in Berlin was to prove false. The fascists in Europe were no more sympathetic to the efforts of Quakers than were those Americans who feared that Jewish child refugees might grow up to become Bolsheviks.

Baker does not attempt to address the reasons for the failure of pacifist strategy, but he is full of admiration for their resolute persistence. Consequently, he is particularly interested in the activities of Quaker organisations and personalities as they confronted Gestapo officials in Heydrich's outer office with the need to do something to ease the suffering of the Jews; he notes too how the efforts of pacifists and others to prevail on the American Congress to admit more Jewish refugees failed in Washington just as they failed to soften fascist hearts in Berlin.

Something similar in the psychological circumstances of the belligerents is implied as we learn of support in the United States for the physical decimation of the German population. We learn also of suggestions made by private citizens in England for the sterilization of German men, which are held to mirror the discussion in ministerial circles in Berlin of proposals for the use of X-rays to sterilize Jews before deportation to the West.

Other similarities are noticed: Charles Portal, the head of the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command, was, like Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the head of Hitler's air force, an enthusiastic huntsman. Although Portal was nowhere near as flamboyant and vain as Göring, Nicholson Baker tells us that he "was a chilly man who enjoyed killing birds and rabbits." In fact he "hawked, beagled, and shot his way through Oxford."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Churchill is seen, like his enemies, to have been a bloody and revengeful man; although not without charm he was a man given to childish indulgences, angry outbursts, and ruthless decisiveness.

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<sup>5</sup> *Human Smoke*, p.170.

Baker observes symmetry between those persecuting, murdering and expelling Jews and those committed to ensuring that the doors to Jewish emigration to the democratic states were hurriedly shut. The British authorities were apparently unconcerned by the prospect of mass starvation provoked by their naval blockade of Europe. Indeed, they appeared to regard the provocation of famine as an integral part of the war effort. Churchill is arraigned for ordering the preparation of chemical and biological weapons while promoting the mass aerial bombardment of men, women, and children in Italy and Germany; the RAF like the Luftwaffe drowned large numbers of people by blowing up water mains which resulted in the flooding of cellars and air raid shelters. In a similar vein Rhys Davies MP's New York Times article of June 1941 is cited:

“Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s declaration in a recent speech that there were millions of Germans who were curable and others who were killable was comparable to Herr Hitler’s attitude toward the Jews”<sup>6</sup>.

Rhys Davies’s desire for pacifist symmetry evidently led him to disregard the fact that Herr Hitler thought that *no* Jews were curable but that *all* were killable – a fact well known even before the Wannsee Conference.<sup>7</sup>

Roosevelt is arraigned for planning the firebombing of Tokyo, and for provoking the Empire of Japan by concentrating much of his naval power in the middle of the Pacific at Pearl Harbour; in June 1941 he also froze Japanese assets in the United States and imposed an oil embargo on the country. These actions were, of course, a

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<sup>6</sup> Rhys Davies, ‘British Laborites Back War Policy’, *New York Times*, June 4, 1941, cited in *Human Smoke*, p.334.

<sup>7</sup> The Wannsee Conference was held 20 January 1942 in Berlin; the ninety-minute meeting enabled SS Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich to assume overall logistical command of the processes adopted for the murder of all Jews in Europe.

response to the widening Japanese aggression in China and East Asia, but the impression given by the pacifist case is that Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo's enormities were in some important senses the dreadful product of the rapacious violence and cynical manoeuvring of the leaders of the democratic states.<sup>8</sup>

There is nothing new here; no startling revelations from the archives are offered. Nevertheless, Nicholson Baker is relentless as he strings together quotation after quotation. He has not, strictly speaking, composed a monograph; there is no description; there is no attempt at a coherent historical account. He provides little or no context for his reportage and quotations, each account of crime, indifference, or resistance, is a free standing vignette, from which it is assumed meaning and purposes will be derived; the arrangement alone is expected to carry the burden of explanation and analysis.

Yet, Nicholson Baker does succeed in making his point: the reader is required to grasp the pointlessness of the Second World War and to discern the tragic ironies encountered upon the road to the final catastrophe which arrives with America's entry into the War because up until then "Most of the people who died in the Second World War were at that moment still alive."

This startling observation, 472 pages in, is followed by the question that Baker says inspired the book: "Was it a 'good war'? Did waging it help anyone who needed help?" Of course we know the answer to this one. After our long trudge through the mire how could we conclude otherwise: the Second World War did not help anyone. It was not a 'good war'. Just in case any readers are still in any doubt, Baker concludes with a paragraph which dedicates the book to American and British pacifists who "tried to save Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> "The bombing offensive," historian Shlomo Aaronson wrote years later, "fed Hitler's wrath, in direct connection with his concept of the 'Jew's war' against him, and helped unite his nation behind him and justify further Nazi atrocities against the remaining Jews." *Human Smoke*, p.391.

refugees, feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan, and stop the war from happening”. Of course, “They failed, but they were right.”

This concluding assertion is the only explicit answer, which Baker gives to his fundamental question. The pacifists, in attempting to prevent the outbreak of War, were right because actually fighting it did nobody any good. This point of view inevitably raises a host of further questions, not the least of which, are what could have prevented the outbreak of the War? And what would have been the consequences of not fighting it? These are not questions that Baker attempts to answer, and this is just as well because they could not be answered by his mimetic technique of assembling a mass of shattered fragments in order to depict the destruction of society; these fragments do not *speak for themselves*. Indeed, it is doubtful that such a collage can answer any questions. Description, context, evaluation, analysis and argument are surely always necessary in historical writing. Nicholson Baker has assembled a history of events leading up to America’s entry into the Second World War; he has done this without claiming it to be a history. In the place of an honest account of his purposes and his principle of selection he has offered a disingenuous silence: merely suggesting that the book is the product of a meditation upon the losses which humanity suffered as it advanced toward the War and the Holocaust. In fact, *Human Smoke* is an attack upon the democratic states that waged war against the Third Reich and the Empire of Japan.<sup>9</sup> Quotations and incidental reports illustrate arguments they

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholson Baker’s meditations upon the slide to war do not, for example include, any thoughts upon the overthrow of the Spanish Republic, or indeed any thoughts upon the Spanish Civil War; there are no thoughts concerning the Italian invasion of Abyssinia; there is no consideration of the Soviet participation in the invasion or partition of Poland. His vignettes concerning the Japanese war upon China and her military aggressions and expansion in East Asia are decidedly sketchy, except when their purpose is to reveal the warlike machinations *against* Japan being hatched between the United States and Nationalist China.

do not make them; vignettes may support an explicit and specific contention, *but not without the contention*.

*Human Smoke* is a cunning book. Its fragmentary form, lacking a coherent analysis or explicit argument, implies that Nicholson Baker wants to leave his readers free to reach their own conclusions; he does not want to impose his own judgements upon his readers. However, he has insinuated a moral equivalence between all the warmongers and warlords of the earth. Of course he does not argue that Eleanor Roosevelt was a fascist or that Winston Churchill believed that gassing Jews was a good idea. His fundamental point is that as men and women committed, like their enemies, to the use of violence and repression, liberal democratic leaders offered no solution during the thirties and forties to the problem of violence and repression. This book by illustrating the scale and depth of the iniquity on offer in the democratic camp – its essential similarity to that on offer in the fascist camp – argues that violence is always destructive and pointless. Consequently, the leaders of the liberal democracies, as demonstrably brutal imperialists, racists and anti-Semites, had nothing to offer which was worth fighting for – they could not help anyone who needed help – they could not wage a ‘good war’.

It is this thesis: liberal democracies cannot fight a good war – cannot fight a war which could help anyone – which gives Baker’s book its currency and relevance. The barbarism involved in the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, the wholesale killing of civilians, arbitrary arrest and torture by the military and security services, the suppression of civil liberties at home and abroad is often compared to the behaviour of tyrants like Saddam Hussein. Symmetry (or equivalence) is often asserted between the Bush Whitehouse and the behaviour of Baathist or Islamist militants. This is, of course, essentially a pacifist position in which all organised violence in the pursuit of political ends is deemed equally appalling and unacceptable. This pacifist position is then generously extended and adopted by those, who for whatever reason, wish to attack the military interventions led by



America: the many opportunists who employ peace-loving arguments in their attacks upon the West, while applauding the heroism of Islamist insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is the context in which *Human Smoke* will receive a favourable reception. It is no good as history, it is no good as a re-evaluation of the Second World War, but as a challenge to the idea that the West can wage a just war it is *just the ticket*.

Of course, from his pacifist perspective Baker would presumably deny that any war could be just. However, in detailing the repressive and racist credentials of the liberal democratic leaders during the twenties, thirties and forties, he has moved the argument beyond pacifist contentions. By vividly illustrating the reactionary outlook of many liberal democratic leaders he is extending the range and appeal of his thesis beyond pacifism to include all those who doubt the credentials and motives of democratic states.

In the light of the manifest violence, racism, and inequality, which shape the social and economic life of liberal democratic societies we are being encouraged to conclude that democracy is not worth fighting for.

However, democracy is not a finished product it has arisen out of a process of widespread struggle in states which while profoundly unequal and repressive established the rule of law and freedom of conscience, and then sought through a process, often a very long and violent process, to apply the equity and freedom of conscience implicit in the rule of law to every man and woman within their particular society. Consequently, Britain and the United States, for example, were thoroughgoing democracies between the wars despite being administered by anti-Semitic colonialists and wealthy segregationists.

As a consequence of many subsequent struggles these liberal democracies have succeeded in achieving greater rights to participation and protection than was formerly the case. Yet millions continue to be unable to exercise the equal rights – *the formal rights* – which they possess within rule-of-law states. The struggle inevitably continues.



This struggle, the violent struggle to defend democratic states, is a struggle to defend societies in which the dispossessed and the disregarded are able to strive for a better life; liberal democracy is the only kind of state in which the prospect of actually realising equal rights and freedom exist. This was the view of the great majority of British people in 1940 and of the American people, both black and white, at the close of 1941.

This view did not mean, of course, that all was harmony, solidarity, and heroic self-sacrifice. The working people in America and Britain did not encounter the horrors and barbarism of the War with heroic optimism. There were strikes, violent disorders, widespread panic, looting, corruption and swindling of all kinds. *Rosie the Riveter* and chirpy cheerful cockneys were summoned up by propagandists to conceal a sordid reality of very long working hours, dangerous working conditions, appalling living conditions, terror, separation, perpetual tension, anxiety, and grief.<sup>10</sup>

The Second World War was not a ‘war for democracy’ – it was a war fought to defend the interests of British, American, and Soviet states against the Third Reich and the Empire of Japan. In any event, war creates an intrinsically tyrannical and anti-democratic set of conditions. War within democratic states always involve the suspension of a great many democratic rights and freedoms; in the forties liberal democratic states became tyrannies overnight with conscription, mass internment without lawful charges or trials, the compulsory direction of labour, the restriction of freedom of speech and organisation, and the prohibition of strikes and demonstrations.<sup>11</sup> This, together with the bloody

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<sup>10</sup> See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1969; and, Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> In the United States strikes began to be suppressed by military force *before* America's entry into the War by the invocation of the President's emergency powers as Commander in Chief. An example of this occurred at North American Aviation's plant on June 9, 1941, when soldiers with fixed

consequences of the horse-trading in the lives of millions of people between Churchill/Atlee, Roosevelt/Truman, and Stalin make it abundantly clear that the war was not, strictly speaking, a war *for* democracy.<sup>12</sup>

However, the defence and pursuit of the interests of the democratic states was of key significance because it ensured the survival of democratic societies, societies in which witch-hunts and show trials, lynching and social oppression, could continue to be fought openly by free political organisations, free campaigns, genuine popular movements and free trade unions.<sup>13</sup>

As an illustration of the pacifist case *Human Smoke* does its job. However, the argument against fighting for democracy is poorly articulated and unconvincing. Although Nicholson Baker's vignettes, quotations and reportage, reveal the nastiness of democratic leaders, and of their respective societies, they do not establish that democracy was not worth defending during the forties. Exposing the iniquity, hubris, or criminal irresponsibility of democratic leaders, soldiers, and diplomats, and the milieu that they inhabit does not allow us to assume that Churchill and Hitler share equal responsibility for the outbreak of the War, or that Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush represent equivalent or comparable evils, they do not.

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bayonets broke a strike by workers demanding a raise to 75 cents an hour. See *Human Smoke*, pp.338-9.

<sup>12</sup> The great wartime conferences, Tehran (November 1943), Yalta (February 1945), and Potsdam (July-August 1945), settled, among other things, the fate of millions, redrawing national boundaries, securing the ethnic cleansing of some twelve million Germans from central and eastern Europe, and returning millions of erstwhile Soviet citizens to the Soviet Union for execution or imprisonment in labour camps.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, even Nicholson Baker does acknowledge that Roosevelt ordered (Executive Order 8802) the opening of defense industries in June 1941 to the employment of black workers. *Human Smoke*, p.343.