

history in a fashion strikingly similar to that of the medievals. The Southern mind tends to see humanity as *homo viator*—man the wayfarer. Man is on a journey through time and place toward eternity, and the work of the Southern critics always kept that grand eternal trajectory in mind. To borrow a phrase from William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the Southern critics evaluated art, history, and human culture with an eye toward perceiving the “old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed.”

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES IN WARTIME

William Anthony Hay

*Moral Combat: Good and Evil in
World War II* by Michael Burleigh
(New York: Harper, 2011)

Georges Clemenceau famously observed that to govern is to choose, and moral dilemmas of choice during wartime reach far beyond the governing elite. Some place themselves beyond good and evil or set up their own moral framework as an alternative to what they consider outdated categories, while others struggle with circumstances that present only bad options. War rarely provides the opportunity for calm reflection

William Anthony Hay, a historian at Mississippi State University, is writing a life of the 2nd Earl of Liverpool, Britain’s prime minister from 1812 to 1827.

upon right and wrong, but many nonetheless strive to reason through the proper relationship between ends and means in using violence. States and individuals both like to claim that God, or at least justice, stands on their side, but what exactly does that mean amid the imperatives of total war?

Michael Burleigh’s *Moral Combat* takes the prevailing moral sentiment of societies and their leadership as a prism for understanding the Second World War and the choices it imposed. Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime in Germany presented an existential threat to the human spirit by establishing a warped moral framework that defined purifying violence as necessary and righteous. Germany’s key allies, Imperial Japan and Fascist Italy, followed a similar pattern, as did the Soviet Union. Winston Churchill recognized the similarities between the Nazi and Communist ideologies, which he rejected as “those non-God religions,” and both of them brought hell on earth to those groups that stood in the way of efforts to impose their vision of the true and only heaven. Cooperation with the Soviet Union raised moral problems for the Allies, as did casualties among noncombatants in the bombing of cities and waging war in occupied territories. Although Burleigh writes as a historian attentive to context and seeking to engage the past on its own terms, he also thoughtfully explores the deeper resonance of events during the Second World War, which continue to shape mentalities today.

Moral Combat fits within Burleigh’s larger intellectual project of understanding the interaction of religion, politics, and society since the Enlightenment, which he has developed through a series of works. The predatory regimes that brought on World War II emerged from the aftermath of World War I, even though Japan and Italy had been on the winning side. Political instability

and cultural malaise, especially in Germany and Italy, created a space filled by movements that extolled violence as a purifying force. Burleigh notes the contrast between the fastidious rituals and exquisitely crafted poetry of Japan and the “odor of sweat that clung to the vulgar European dictators.” Anarchy empowered radical army officers who undermined the rule of law in Japan, which lacked a transcendent moral code to check orders from above. Benito Mussolini and Hitler used organized parties to seize control of the state and marginalize other sources of authority. While Mussolini never gained full power over the church, monarchy, or armed forces, Hitler used his expression of dangerous thoughts others could not themselves articulate to corrupt the society; and the French premier Édouard Daladier aptly described him as “a popular chief, with something of the religious authority of Mahomet.” Expansionism was a response not only to grievances each regime felt but also to a combination of ideological and material preoccupations that viewed war as the only solution to its weakness.

World War I had a different impact on other societies, and Burleigh attributes Anglo-French appeasement to guilt and fear. What seemed to be a realistic way to avoid renewed war derived from a very unrealistic view of predator states. Neville Chamberlain assumed a fundamental decency in others that drew him into what Churchill considered the pursuit of “futile good intentions.” The idea that reasonable demands could be reasonably accommodated ignored the nature of Hitler’s regime and its agenda, although public resistance to war gave appeasement broad support among the governing class. Misguided attempts at compromise, which culminated with concessions at Munich in 1938, undermined efforts to check the dictators and eventually drove Josef Stalin into a

deal with Hitler at the expense of Eastern Europe.

Choices on both sides shaped the coming of war as concessions or indifference emboldened aggression. The dictators misread their adversaries no less than Chamberlain failed to take Hitler’s measure. Britain’s decision to declare war over the invasion of Poland surprised Hitler, but it also showed both the end of earlier illusions and a determination to fight that only strengthened in the face of repeated disaster. Chamberlain backed Churchill, who replaced him as prime minister in 1940, in rejecting compromise with Germany as France lurched toward defeat. Instead, the British cabinet embraced a defiant policy captured in David Low’s June 18 cartoon showing a soldier raising his fist to the Luftwaffe with the caption “VERY WELL, ALONE.” Public opinion stood firm through the Blitz, which Burleigh notes meant the equivalent of the 9/11 attack each month for a year. Churchill struck a chord with the words “We are fighting by ourselves; but we are not fighting for ourselves.” Moral purpose set the tone for Britain’s war effort.

Isolationism raised questions in the United States, especially as the nature of the war became clear. Southerners, as Richard Weaver pointed out at the time, realized the nature of Hitler’s revolution of nihilism despite their region’s racial politics. The Southern tradition expressed a forceful critique of totalitarianism, as later scholars including Eugene Genovese have cogently argued, while political and social elites on the East Coast had European ties that kept them up to date with developments that made the stakes clear. Midwesterners, by contrast, viewed war as a corrupting force that benefited wealthy interests at the expense of ordinary people. Isolationism often sprang from an idealistic desire to preserve America as the last arcadia. It also

reflected ideological motives and baser prejudices, especially among anti-Semites and Anglophobes. Ethnic politics, then as now, shaped debate over foreign policy. These dynamics limited Franklin Roosevelt's freedom to respond before Japan's clarifying act of violence at Pearl Harbor. Lend-lease in March 1941 escalated American support for Britain, though Burleigh underplays the demands Washington pressed in return for aid. Robert Taft, who despite sympathizing with Britain opposed entering the war, compared the loan of war equipment with lending chewing gum, pointing out that "you certainly don't want the same gum back."

German and Soviet campaigns in Poland set the tone for the war in what Timothy Snyder has aptly called the "bloodlands" of Eastern Europe. Poland gave many young Germans "their first experience of a foreign country where people looked alien and spoke incomprehensible languages," while many of their elders had views formed by the ferocious intercommunal strife that immediately followed World War I. These factors not only inclined men to violence but also eroded internal checks on behavior, making drunkenness and looting commonplace. Burleigh quotes letters from German soldiers who reveled in their power to destroy, along with complaints by the conservative diplomat Ulrich von Hassell "about being led by criminal adventurers." The competing ideological projects of Nazis and Communists obscured the gangster mentality on both sides that stripped away such moral restraints as remained among those ruled by the two regimes. (Much the same occurred with Japan during the course of its struggle in China.) Soviet political culture gave Stalin a cadre of willing executioners who spoke and acted like thugs while advertising their cruelty as a badge of pride. The horrors that followed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet

Union and the consequent escalation of the Holocaust followed a path marked out from the war's beginning.

Occupation imposed moral dilemmas on all the conquered lands, although Hitler's plans for Eastern Europe made circumstances there far harsher. From her British exile, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands instructed civil servants to continue their work, and Charles de Gaulle likewise urged judges to remain in place to prevent zealots from hijacking the legal system. Cooperation along such lines sought to protect the existing social order and insulate the public from German demands. The Vichy regime in France went further in collaborating, partly in a failed effort to keep Germany at bay, but also with the hope of turning defeat to advantage through a program of national regeneration, rather than continuing prewar internal struggles. Choices lay between the extremes of collaboration and resistance, and Burleigh explores how individuals navigated them as they continued ordinary life in the presence of an alien power. The "growling stomach" marked the true voice of occupied France, as the average family spent 75 percent of its income on food. Can workers who took higher wages from German employers or factory owners and farmers who traded with Germany to compensate for lost export markets be blamed? Burleigh contrasts their behavior—and that of creative artists who remained apolitical and focused on professional survival—with choices by officials and transport workers whose actions facilitated the deportation of Jews and others. Consequences mattered in determining culpability under occupation.

Those choices were much starker in Eastern Europe caught between Hitler and Stalin. Burleigh takes the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich as an example of the moral calculus in balancing resistance

against brutal reprisals. Jews faced only bad choices as the Holocaust forced community leaders crushed by the burden of responsibility to police their own. Buying time by sacrificing the vulnerable proved futile, and surviving the camps demanded a combination of determination to live and flexibility. The total loss of autonomy by victims was part of the dehumanizing process. What place could altruism have except as an attempt to reclaim control? Perpetrators lost their own humanity, and the Nazi vision of racial struggle as a basis for morality had a corrosive effect. Drunken excess and violence reflected the strain upon soldiers, while occupied regions and the camps became a paradise for sociopaths. Germans besides the SS and party agents became complicit in criminality, no matter how much they tried to ignore the reality around them. The higher law of Nazi morality barely masked the looting and hedonism whose tempo increased as the avalanche of the Soviet army fell upon Germany.

Area bombing raised moral questions of its own, and it developed from a sequence of decisions that reflected the course of the war and the blurring of limits. German attacks on industrial and military targets during the Battle of Britain brought civilian casualties even before the Blitz devastated parts of London in September 1940. Hugh Dalton described Picadilly burning as “quite like a *Götterdämmerung* which must make even German pilots brought up on all that Wagner stuff, faintly fearful of their future fate.” Public pressure to retaliate combined with the difficulty of striking precision targets and Britain’s lack of alternative means for bringing the war to Germany after Dunkirk made strategic bombing an appealing option. Burleigh stresses the risks to crews whose casualty rates matched those at Gallipoli and the Somme during

World War I to show how little questions of proportionality or cause and effect mattered to those involved. German escalation in the so-called Baedeker Raids against picturesque cities of no military value only brought a fiercer response with the bombing of Cologne, Bremen, and Hamburg. The devastation sparked a debate in Britain over bombing and criticism within the government itself. Cyril Garbett, archbishop of York, argued in response that many times life offered no clear choice between absolute right and wrong, presenting instead a decision over the lesser of two evils. Bombing a war-loving Germany involved a lesser evil than sacrificing the lives of fellow countrymen longing for peace or delaying the deliverance of millions held in slavery.

The United States followed Britain’s lead in bombing Germany, and American leaders expressed their own doubts about targeting civilians. German raids on Britain and Hitler’s war in the East muted general sympathy, however, and the overall campaign had bred callous indifference to suffering. Japanese atrocities, particularly against Allied prisoners of war, had a similar effect in making the Anglo-American Allies wage a war without mercy. The Australian general Thomas Blamey, after facing evidence of torture and cannibalism, told his soldiers in the brutal New Guinea campaign: “You know we have to exterminate these vermin if we and our families are to live. . . . We must exterminate the Japanese.” Refusal by Japanese soldiers to surrender led Allied forces to respond with increasing degrees of firepower. Bombing Germany gave Americans a template for the latter stages of the Pacific War. As with Germany, area bombing provided a way to avoid casualties in attritional fighting, and Japanese leaders imagined that American concern with casualties would permit them to force a compromise peace rather than

surrender. Instead, the United States incinerated Japan's cities while imposing a close blockade on the home islands. While even the most hard line commanders like Curtis LeMay saw "no point in slaughtering civilians for the sake of slaughter," they and their civilian superiors faced the need to end the war quickly. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki aimed to shock the Japanese into surrender, even though conventional bombing had already inflicted catastrophic damage. After the second attack, Hirohito accepted the inevitable and Japan surrendered.

Although Hirohito managed an incredible feat of political survival by hanging on as a figurehead, the three predator regimes met their demise. Germany's Nazis, as Joseph Goebbels predicted, monopolized the spot reserved for evil in the Western imagination, while the Soviet Union avoided much of the taint from its own behavior by dint of its alliance with the United States and Britain. Victory gave the Soviet regime a domestic legitimacy that doubtless contributed to its survival into the 1990s. World War II became the "good war," especially from the perspective of post-Vietnam nostalgia for what American commentators dubbed "the greatest generation." Memories of the war resonate in British public culture to the present day as a period of national unity and purpose that compensates for subsequent decline and the loss of empire. European countries with more equivocal records during the 1940s engaged in a conscious act of forgetting, and public memory itself became a contested ground. All these factors point to lingering moral issues that the Second World War raises even more than half a century later. Perhaps the most important lesson from Burleigh's story lies in the danger nihilism and relativism alike pose to civilized society; even without the strains of total

war, that point resonates today. Indeed, that resonance may be part of why World War II still retains such a hold on public attention.

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL BY AN UNTHINKING THING

Anne Barbeau Gardiner

*Abortion and the Moral Significance of
Merely Possible Persons: Finding Middle
Ground in Hard Cases* by Melinda
A. Roberts (Dordrecht, Heidelberg,
London, New York: Springer, 2010)

In her book on abortion, Melinda A. Roberts purports to hold the "middle ground" in the greatest debate of our times, but a Christian reader will surely find her proposal to be as extreme as Swift's *Modest Proposal*—only without the irony. What is particularly troubling is that this book appears as volume 107 of a series called "Philosophy and Medicine," whose editors include H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. from the Department of Philosophy at Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine, and Kevin W. Wildes, SJ, president of Loyola University, New Orleans. From such editors one expects a book that does not violate Christian ethics.

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