



# Forgetting Hiroshima, remembering Auschwitz: Tales of two exhibits

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## Abstract

This paper uses two museum exhibitions to raise questions about how Hiroshima and Auschwitz are coped with in the present. The stake of the paper is to examine how it has been possible for different polities to come to terms with criminal pasts that should cause shame and guilt. The criminality of Auschwitz is established, but not that of Hiroshima. In the first instance, then, the paper establishes the extent to which the justifications for the bombing of Hiroshima were and remain controversial. The second part of the paper compares debates around two exhibitions: the Hiroshima exhibition at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC and the exhibition 'Extermination War: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–44' which travelled through Germany and Austria in the late 1990s.

## Keywords

Auschwitz, guilt, Hiroshima, responsibility, shame, Smithsonian

## I

This essay is concerned with something that Germans call *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, literally translatable as working-off-the-past – coping-with-the-past, dealing-with-the-past, overcoming-the-past are often used as substitutable equivalents. Not any old past requires such treatment, or such long compound words: the term and its synonyms refer to the process by which a nation and its citizens have come to terms with a criminal past that should evoke guilt and shame – or failed to do so. Using two major exhibits that were simultaneously held in 1995 in Hamburg and in Washington, I will compare the ways

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Auschwitz and Hiroshima have been worked-off. Before turning to working-off-the-past, however, we must return to the past itself: why was the bomb dropped on Hiroshima?

Historians who know the period know differently, but 70 years afterwards, most of the rest of us imagine Hiroshima through the edges of myth. *After more or less careful, informed deliberation, Truman decided to drop the bomb to end the war without an American invasion of Japan that would have cost countless lives.* Those of us whose natural political instincts turn left regret the decision as woefully short-sighted, for in opening the atomic age it initiated an arms race that could still destroy the planet. We also question the assumption that the lives of American soldiers have more weight than the lives of Japanese civilians, even as we acknowledge the political forces that make such a calculation seem self-evident. Was the decision affected by racism, or simply a matter of every nation's tendency to put its citizens first, whether they are soldiers or civilians? Either way we are inclined to condemn Truman for taking a step in the history of warfare that cannot be undone. It's worth recalling that when Picasso painted *Guernica*, aerial bombing of women and children was considered outrageous. Less than a decade later the firebombing of Tokyo, which killed more civilians immediately than the bombing of Hiroshima, would be regarded as normal warfare. At the time, Hiroshima seemed part of a continuum; now we know that the use of nuclear weapons marked a qualitative difference that should not have been permitted.

This is the view that I held, along with most of the informed and conscientious Americans I know. It's a view that was expressed with his usual clarity by John Rawls in an essay written to mark the 50th anniversary of Hiroshima for the magazine *Dissent*. Rawls argued that there are situations in which nations might legitimately attack civilians by aerial bombing, such as the months when Britain faced Nazi Germany's superior military power alone, since 'the crucial matter is that under no condition could Germany be allowed to win the war' (Rawls, 1998 [1995]: 474). Such crisis conditions did not hold in 1945, so that 'both Hiroshima and the firebombing of Japanese cities were great evils that the duties of statesmanship require political leaders to avoid in the absence of the crisis exemption' (Rawls, 1998 [1995]: 474). Among those who knew Rawls' biography, this essay was – rightly, in my view – seen as evidence of his own moral character: as a soldier in the Pacific, his was one of the lives that might well have been lost in a US invasion of the Home Islands. Even nobler, or more Kantian, was his refusal to mention that fact – or to allow Michael Walzer, the editor of *Dissent* at the time, to include it in a biographical note (as told to me by Walzer in 1996). The attempt to base moral judgments on reasons, and to avoid any hint of pathos or self-righteousness, was a hallmark of Rawls' writing.

Rawls' position on Hiroshima was undoubtedly a moral one, and moral judgments must often be made without complete knowledge of the facts. Yet his perpetuation of the myths surrounding Hiroshima is characteristic of a standpoint that usually mars even the best philosophical work. Here is his summary of the reasons Hiroshima was bombed:

The bomb was dropped to hasten the end of the war. It is clear that Truman and most other allied leaders thought it would do that. Another reason was that it would save lives where the lives counted are the lives of American soldiers. The lives of Japanese, military or

civilian, presumably counted for less. Here the calculations of least time and most lives saved were mutually supporting. . . . The last reason I mention is that the bomb was dropped to impress the Russians with American power and make them more agreeable with our demands. This reason is highly disputed but urged by some critics and scholars as important. . . . I also believe this could have been done at little cost in further casualties. An invasion was unnecessary at that date, as the war effectively was over. *However, whether that is true or not makes no difference.* Without the crisis exemption, those bombings were great evils. (Rawls 1998 [1995]: 475, emphasis added)

Striking in this discussion is Rawls' carefully agnostic attitude towards the events which led to Hiroshima. 'Some critics and scholars' view the desire to impress the Soviet Union as important; 'I also believe' an invasion was unnecessary. While I share Rawls' conclusion that the decision to drop the bomb was wrong whatever the facts turn out to be, I'm disturbed by his desire to stand above the historical fray. For in so doing he barely leaves a scratch on the picture that was very deliberately created at the behest of James Conant, president of Harvard and member of the Interim Committee created to advise Truman on the use of nuclear arms.

In a telling letter written in September 1946, Conant said that few Americans criticized the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Polls confirmed this conclusion: at the time, 85 per cent of Americans surveyed approved of the decision, and 22 per cent thought the US should have attacked Japan with even more atomic weapons. But John Hersey's widely read *New Yorker* report on the aftermath of the bombing, as well as a protest written by many of the scientists who had worked on the Manhattan Project, were beginning to create doubt. 'A small minority', wrote Conant, 'If it represents the type of person who is both sentimental and verbally minded and in contact with our youth could create a distortion of history' (quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 94). 'This type of sentimentalism', Conant continued, 'For so I regard it, is bound to have a great deal of influence on the next generation. The type of person who goes into teaching, particularly school teaching, will be influenced a great deal by this type of argument' (quoted in Walker, 1997: 102).

To preclude that influence, Conant persuaded Henry Stimson to write an article that appeared in February 1947 in *Harper's* magazine. Stimson, a Republican who had been Secretary of War from 1940–5, was an ideal choice for the task. Writing his memoirs in retirement, he commanded respect across party lines. Stimson's dispassionate article seemed all the more authoritative for its lack of reference to any criticism of the bombing. The essay had consequences any academic might envy: it was almost solely responsible for creating the legend most Americans, and indeed most westerners take for granted: after judicious weighing of all the alternatives, Truman authorized an atomic attack in order to avoid an invasion of Japan which was 'expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone' (quoted in Walker, 1997: 102; on Conant's steering and editing of the article see Alperovitz, 1995; Lifton and Mitchell, 1995).

Stimson knew as well as anyone that those numbers were wrong. The hypothetical counting of casualties has been the subject of scholarly debate, but military estimates during the summer of 1945 concerned casualties in the thousands. Now Truman, or any other American president, might well have dropped the bomb to avoid 46,000 US

casualties, the very highest figure estimated in 1945. Some may find this sort of calculation of body counts morally repellent in any case; for Dostoevsky, the death of one single child was too high a price to pay for redemption. But those who care about truth will be appalled at the successive inflation of the number of American lives the bomb allegedly saved – by 1990, George H.W. Bush would speak of many millions – by one who knew so much better.

Even more appalling, however, is the fact that Stimson knew that the speculation about *any* number of casualties was purely hypothetical. For by the early summer of 1945, the majority of Truman's advisors believed that Japan was close to surrender. Both before and after the war, the highest ranking military officers – including Admiral Leahy, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Eisenhower, General LeMay, and many others – argued that neither an invasion nor the use of nuclear weapons were necessary to end the war (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: lviii; Walker, 1997: 90).<sup>1</sup> Japan was near collapse. The US military blocked its ports and dominated its skies, preventing deliveries of badly needed raw materials. Most of its cities had been so thoroughly devastated that assistant secretary of war John J. McCloy told his boss on 17 June, 'There are no more cities to bomb, no more carriers to sink or battleships to bomb; we have difficulty finding targets' (quoted in Bird and Lifschutz, 1998: lviii). The surviving Japanese were starving. A continued American blockade alone would have likely ended the war by November. An American blockade and a declaration of war by the Soviet Union would have surely ended it even sooner. The full extent of Japan's ruin may have become clear only after the occupation, but the US had already broken its war code, and knew that the Japanese ambassador to Moscow, unaware of the Yalta agreements, was desperately trying to move the Soviet Union to mediate a peace settlement.

Only one condition stood in the way of surrender, Japan's insistence on keeping its emperor, whose status was considered to be almost divine. (His voice was first heard by most Japanese when announcing the surrender on 14 August 1945 in a radio broadcast – an event many Japanese found more shocking than the bomb itself.) With the Nuremberg trials already in preparation, the prospect of seeing the emperor tried and hung would have strengthened crumbling Japanese morale and guaranteed a long and bloody invasion. On 13 July, the US had intercepted a cable from Japanese Foreign Minister Togo to Moscow asserting that 'it is His Majesty's heart's desire to see the swift termination of the war' as well as another that stated 'Unconditional surrender is the only obstacle to peace' (quoted in Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: lxi).<sup>2</sup>

Truman was initially inclined to seek a face-saving formula which left the emperor on his throne under control of a US military administration – the formula that was accepted after it became clear that Japanese surrender, and US occupation, would be far easier to administer if the emperor were there to order it. Much later, Stimson and McGeorge Bundy wrote that 'history might find that the United States, by its delay in stating its position, had prolonged the war' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 110). They report that General MacArthur made the same point (see also Alperovitz, 1995: 502, 634). If saving American lives had really been a US priority, the assurances concerning the emperor could have been made, at the latest, in June. Stimson himself, during the crucial negotiations at Potsdam, was one of several advisors who advocated doing so. But 'the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was sealed by a muted but profound conflict between a majority

of Truman's advisors and the President's friend Byrnes' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: lx). The South Carolina Senator James Byrnes, too conservative to win the 1944 Democratic nomination for Vice President that unexpectedly propelled Truman to the presidency a year later, had befriended the junior senator from Missouri. Truman's lack of experience in foreign policy led him to depend heavily on Byrnes, whom he quickly appointed as Secretary of State. Byrnes accompanied Truman on the ship to the conference at Potsdam that had been called to discuss the final terms for ending the war. Despite the urging of both Churchill and Stalin, Truman postponed the conference, originally scheduled for June, in order to await the results of the first atomic test in New Mexico. By the time Truman reached Potsdam, Byrnes' advice and the successful explosion at Alamogordo had convinced him that diplomatic negotiation with Japan – and even more importantly, with the Soviet Union – was unnecessary. Stimson and other advisors 'arrived at Potsdam by other routes to discover that the diplomatic plan on which they had been diligently working for the past month had suddenly been altered without any prior notice' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: lx).

The Potsdam Declaration, issued at the end of the conference, offered Japan a choice between unconditional surrender and complete destruction. Since Pearl Harbor, the US had pressed the Soviet Union to attack Japan, or at least to allow the US to do so itself from eastern Siberia; in view of the enormous pressure on its Western Front, Stalin had insisted that the other Allies open a second front against the Wehrmacht instead. By Yalta, Stalin had promised to invade Japan three months after the war in Europe had been ended. Although a major initial goal of the Potsdam conference had been to insure that Stalin kept that promise, the Soviet Union was not asked to be a signatory to the Declaration, leaving the Japanese to hope the Soviet Union might maintain its neutrality. Byrnes had convinced Truman to order a nuclear attack without prior warning, thus ending the war without Soviet involvement.

Nearly every historian who has studied the events of those crucial months agrees on this much. Some matters are still debated. Rotblat and Szilard, two of the scientists who worked on the bomb, reported being told that the real purpose of the bomb was to subdue the Soviets – information that led Rotblat to become the only scientist to leave the Manhattan Project (Rotblat quoted in Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: xxiv; diaries of Stimson and Truman support this view). Both Byrnes and Leslie Groves, the military director at Los Alamos, repeated such claims often enough that their truth is not in doubt, only the question of how much weight this consideration played in the decision.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars, pointing to the ongoing assumption that the bomb would be used if it could be shown to work, question the idea that there was a decision at all (see especially Gordin, 2007). Others point to political concerns: would Congress create problems about the amount of funds that had been appropriated for the mysterious Manhattan Project if it didn't issue in something visible? And historians argue about why nine days passed between the explosion at Hiroshima and the Japanese surrender. Was it because communications – already damaged by conventional bombing and destroyed by atomic bombing – barely functioned between Hiroshima and Tokyo? Was Nagasaki useful in convincing the militarist wing of the Japanese government that no amount of suicidal courage could withstand American technology? Or was it the Russian declaration of war that led the Japanese to quickly press for better terms with the Americans? Japanese military memos

of those days focused more on the Soviet Union; since the Soviets had killed their own emperor but a few decades earlier, they could hardly be expected to spare Hirohito.

If the question of why the bomb was dropped and what role it played in the timing of the surrender can still be disputed among serious scholars, one answer can be ruled out: the bomb was *not* needed to avoid an American invasion. The US did not drop the bomb in order to end the war or save lives. Nor was this a fact that had to be uncovered decades later through declassified documents or lost diaries, though these certainly helped document it. In the fall of 1945 Truman ordered a team of investigators to conduct the US Strategic Bombing Survey to examine the effectiveness of US bombing in ending the war. The investigators, led by such directors as Paul Nitze and John Kenneth Galbraith, concluded that even in Germany, the bombing caused less damage than it cost to inflict, and their conclusions about Japan were more devastating:

Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasions had been planned or contemplated. . . . The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs did not defeat Japan, nor by the testimony of the enemy leaders who ended the war did they persuade Japan to accept unconditional surrender. (U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, 1946, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 83)

Nor was the report kept secret; much of it was printed in the *U.S. News*. In the early days after the war, before controversy about the bomb had arisen, the idea that the bomb was not needed to end the war was so banal that Byrnes himself let it slip at a press conference that resulted in a *New York Times* headline on 30 August 1945: 'Japan Beaten Before Atom Bomb, Byrnes Says, Citing Peace Bid' (see Alperovitz, 1995: 506; Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: xxxiii). One month later, General Curtis LeMay described the atomic bombing as 'anticlimactic' because 'the verdict had already been rendered'. Eisenhower described a meeting with Stimson just before the Potsdam Conference:

I had been conscious of a feeling of depression, and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly, because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum of loss of 'face'. And just weeks after Hiroshima, Truman himself publicly declared that the bomb 'did not win the war' (in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 240)

Given the general agreement among political and military leaders that the bomb was not necessary to avoid an invasion, it's impossible to know what considerations of loyalty or fears for national security led Stimson to lie. According to Lifton and Mitchell, he reported considerable qualms about the crucial *Harper's* article.

'I have rarely been connected with a paper about which I have so much doubt at the last moment,' Stimson told a friend. 'I think the full enumeration of the steps in the tragedy will excite horror among friends who heretofore thought me a kindly minded Christian gentleman but who will, after reading this, feel I am cold blooded and cruel'. (quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 101)

As James Conant had hoped, his article created a legend that fooled us sentimental educators to this day. Thirty years later, Michael Walzer's eloquent classic *Just and Unjust Wars* would make a moral argument that it was wrong to drop the bomb, on many of the same grounds that Rawls later cited. Yet Walzer's main source for the historical events that led to dropping the bomb was an article called 'The Decision to Use the Bomb' which Walzer quotes widely – the *Harper's* article authored by Henry Stimson.

There is no room for doubt: Stimson's article was as false as it was influential. Historians today agree on this; even more surprisingly, agreement at the time crossed political borders, uniting observers as utterly different as Albert Einstein and John Foster Dulles. In view of the commonness of this knowledge in 1945–6, today's gap between the historians and general public opinion, even highly educated general public opinion, is nearly as scandalous as the use of the bomb – whose full effects were unknown in 1945 – itself.<sup>4</sup>

## II

*But war, we know, is hell, and it makes people hellish. Didn't Shakespeare say that everything is fair in it? Since Biblical times, innocents have been war's casualties, as brave young men who wanted nothing more than to defend their homes and families do things in the heat and smoke of battle that later seem regrettable. Given what we know about war through the ages – everybody suffers, and everybody sins – it is cruel, unfair, and unpatriotic to single out the deeds of our men, who risked and often gave their lives for the homeland they loved.*

From 1995–9, these were the sort of comments made by visitors to the exhibit entitled 'Extermination War: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–44', which travelled through Germany and Austria. Using soldiers' letters and photographs, the exhibit made clear that the crimes of the Nazi military were not limited to elite SS units, nor confined to a few bad apples. Rather, the Wehrmacht systematically fought a war of extermination against Jews and Slavs, and its conduct far exceeded normal military behaviour in cruelty, violence and scope. The exhibit was organized by the privately funded Hamburg Institute for Social Research as a contribution to the many events prepared throughout Germany to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war's end, never suspecting that it would become the most controversial. The organizers, historians and sociologists, who knew the relevant material intimately, had not imagined the intensity of reactions to the exhibit. After all, the claim that the Wehrmacht systematically committed war crimes hardly seemed in need of proof to foreign observers, or even to most German historians. But the gap between historical scholarship and ordinary memory proved tremendous; the exhibit was described as breaking the last taboo of the Nazi period in a country that had been examining its behaviour during that period for several decades of critical

discussion. Since the late '60s, German intellectuals had worked-off the wartime actions of doctors, diplomats, judges and others. But with 18 million members, the Wehrmacht affected a broader scope of German society than any other organization. Very nearly every German had a father or a brother or a husband who served in it, if they didn't serve themselves, and the reactions to the exhibit revealed that most of them still clung to the myth that the Wehrmacht was 'clean', even 'knightly'. *Its soldiers, brave men who defended their home against the Bolshevik menace, were no better or worse than millions of soldiers before or afterwards.*

Originally planned as a relatively limited project, what came to be known simply as 'The Wehrmacht Exhibit' was seen by nearly one million viewers in 33 cities over a four-year period, igniting media discussions, filling talk shows, and eventually provoking a debate in parliament. In every city to which it traveled the local public took over, adding its own programs of lectures, plays and podium discussions to accompany the exhibit. In many cities, however, the public united to protest the exhibit: encouraged by a Bavarian Christian Democratic politician, 5000 neo-Nazis demonstrated against the exhibit in Munich, carrying signs bearing slogans such as *German Soldiers – Heroic Deeds*. In German it rhymes. They were met by 10,000 counterdemonstrators who defended the exhibit, though no defence could prevent the firebombing that took place when the exhibit was shown in Saarbrücken. (No one was hurt in the latter, and the exhibit was shown after minor repairs.)

The furor the exhibit caused testified to the gap between historical scholarship and personal memory, or rather personal forgetfulness. Many visitors came to the exhibit carrying small photos of their fathers or grandfathers to compare with the photographs in the exhibit. *Was that really him next to the hanging hostage? Did he grin or gawk or look away?* Such visitors were actively looking for truth about matters that had long been evaded in their families – in some cases because the soldiers in question never returned from the war. Those whose relatives were absent from the photos of ordinary men tormenting or killing civilians expressed relief; those who found the evidence they'd feared often expressed gratitude for the clarity they'd found: now they understood why, their mothers said, Papa or Uncle Franz returned from the war a different man. But many others, both those who visited the exhibit and even more of those who did not, protested vehemently: *Grandpa was no criminal! My uncle was a decent soldier who gave his life for his country! We refuse to let our fathers be defamed as murderers by this one-sided exhibit!* Children and grandchildren of Wehrmacht veterans were not the only ones to attend the exhibit. Many veterans came themselves, and their reactions were equally divided. Some complained bitterly that the exhibit slandered their deeds, and those of their fallen comrades; others said quietly 'That's just how it was'. As it became clear that the exhibit unleashed a torrent of private emotion, the organizers sought ways for visitors to express it, and the reactions to the exhibit became themselves an object of study.<sup>5</sup>

Thus we have documented reactions that go somewhat further than *Hands off my grandpa!* Again and again commentators insisted that a fair exhibit would also document Wehrmacht soldiers' suffering – Salzburg produced a counter-exhibit devoted to the lives of German and Austrian POWs in Soviet prison camps – as well as other nations' war crimes. One critic argued that the execution of hostages by guns or gallows was comparatively humane, and added that 'the execution of hostages was also horrible for



many soldiers commanded to do it. Allied bombers were spared such scenes; they caused a thousandfold miserable deaths in cellars they never had to see' (from *Eine Ausstellung*, p. 68). All the critics insisted that the war against Bolshevism was necessary and wished that Germany, like other normal nations, would honour those who defended their country.

Were these unrepresentative voices in the mid-90s? Unfortunately not. The exhibit attracted sufficient attention to merit a day of parliamentary debate in 1997. The Bundestag records make for interesting reading, for the emotion in this normally dust-dry forum is evident; in an environment that normally shuns personal references, every speaker mentioned his or her family's own wartime experience. With few exceptions, the parliamentarians stuck to party lines. Members of the three left-leaning parties praised the exhibit, while the Christian Democrats – in power under Kohl at the time as they are under Merkel today – insisted on the primacy of German wartime suffering, and on the basis of the woefully inadequate example of the July 20 conspirators, urged that the Wehrmacht be viewed as a source of resistance to Hitler. The proposal to show the exhibit in the Bundestag failed, and the parliamentary resolution finally passed was a model of banality that wasn't banal at all for those who knew the codes, which included virtually any German who could read or write. 'The German Bundestag is decidedly against any one-sided or general condemnation of the members of the Wehrmacht' (from *Eine Ausstellung*, p. 30). This may not be surprising in a country that waited until 2009 to rehabilitate those Wehrmacht soldiers condemned to death for treason for such acts as criticizing Nazism in their diaries. Only 20,000 of the 30,000 convicted of treason were actually executed, but by 2009, even those who had survived the Nazis had succumbed to natural causes. Their relatives, however, can now apply to have their names cleared with a simple form.

Still, the vote that passed the resolution that politely denounced the exhibit was a close one, 301 to 283, reflecting political majorities that would change the following year. And though the Wehrmacht exhibit was never shown in the Reichstag, as its left-leaning members had hoped, the debate increased demand for the exhibit elsewhere, as well as politicians' willingness to speak at one of its many openings. While the exhibit was initially created with private funding, a significant amount of public funding was required for it to travel outside Hamburg. The search for that funding often created municipal political dramas – but with or without drama, 96 municipalities in Germany and Austria ultimately asked to have the exhibit shown. And if 5000 fought its presence in Munich, 10,000 fought back there, despite the fact that Bavaria is a bastion of right-wing sympathy. The Wehrmacht exhibit is now part of the history of postwar Germany; no German listening to the media at the time, or learning about postwar Germany since, can fail to know something about it. When people point to Germany as an example of a nation that has worked hard to come to terms with its criminal past, the Wehrmacht exhibit is Exhibit A.

At the same time that the Wehrmacht exhibit was being planned in Hamburg, the National Air and Space Museum, flagship of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington and the most visited museum in the world, was also planning an exhibit to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war's end. Centrepiece of the exhibit was to be the restored body of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that had dropped the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.

Director Martin Harwit wanted to surround the plane with an exhibit which would ‘neither glorify nor apologize for’ the bombing, but explore it. This was too much for critics, who had been leaked a copy of internal memos by someone within the museum. They criticized the fact that more than half the photographs of dead Japanese were women and children, they objected to the inclusion of a schoolgirl’s charred lunchbox. The museum used the figure of 30,000–50,000 American lives potentially saved by the bomb, based on recently declassified documents; veterans insisted on using the official estimates of half a million to a million. Mostly, the critics complained that only Japanese not American victims were depicted, without suggesting how it could be otherwise in an exhibit meant to centre on the *Enola Gay*. As curator Crunch later put it:

I think what fundamentally bothers people about the show is that it attempts to tell the fullest story possible. In other words, it doesn’t end when the bomb leaves the bomb bay. (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 282)

Under pressure from veterans’ groups, Harwit revised the original plans, proposing to begin with a section on Japanese war crimes. As media grew increasingly virulent, Harwit dismissed as ‘absolute nonsense’ the air force historian’s charge that the museum was ‘still pushing the thesis that the atom bomb shouldn’t have been dropped’ (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 283). In fact, as we saw, that thesis was held by most of Truman’s advisors, as quotes from Eisenhower and Leahy, originally planned as part of the exhibit, clearly reveal. But even raising the question of whether the bomb should have been dropped was enough to get Harwit called to Capitol Hill, where the new Republican majority in Congress insured that a resolution was passed unanimously condemning the exhibit as ‘revisionist, unbalanced and offensive’ and threatened to withdraw the Smithsonian’s funding. Harwit revised yet again, expanding the section on Japanese wartime cruelty, deleting many photographs of dead and wounded Japanese as well as the statement that the decision to bomb Hiroshima ‘has sparked controversy over the years’. One hopes that someone appreciated the irony: in the midst of the biggest controversy in the history of the Smithsonian, the very mention of controversy was deemed too . . . controversial. Orwell could hardly imagine a better form of repression.

Not all the proposed changes involved deletions. A panel asking ‘Was an Invasion Inevitable without the Bomb?’ was now labelled ‘Hindsight’, implying that no one had raised the question before the bomb was dropped. Still, 81 members of Congress demanded that Harwit be fired for his ‘continuing defiance and disregard for needed improvements in the exhibit’ (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 327). He had, it was complained, been too influenced by his work on the nuclear weapons tests at Bikini. Harwit had indeed said that ‘I think anyone who has ever seen a hydrogen bomb go off at fairly close range knows that you don’t ever want to see that used on people’ (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 323). He, and his curators, were dismissed as ‘part of the anti-Vietnam generation’, people who ‘obviously hate this country and shouldn’t be working here’. The Canadian curator was suspect because he had studied in Calgary at a time ‘when Americans were fleeing to Canada to escape the draft’ and the exhibit as a whole because it was ‘close to treason’ (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 286, 288).

Harwit's final attempt to save the exhibit deleted all the key quotes, eliminated all but one photo of a Japanese victim, and accepted the official estimate of American casualties expected in an invasion as 260,000 to one million. The final script 'was nothing more or less than the 1947 Stimson article with visual aids' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 290). At that point a group of historians finally complained: new readings of Leahy's diary left the much lower estimate of potential American casualties beyond doubt. Harwit accepted the scholars' figures and informed the veterans of the change, whereupon the veterans wrote to Congress, whose new Speaker, Newt Gingrich, called for the exhibit to be cancelled. The only solution 'which the veterans, their congressional allies, and finally the Smithsonian's board could all embrace: get rid of the casualty debate, the victims, and all other potentially troubling questions and keep the plane' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 295). This was, in the end, the solution that prevailed.

Supporters of the exhibit compared the museum's unconditional surrender to Japan's (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 338). Harwit resigned. The editors of the superb collection *Hiroshima's Shadow* wrote: 'The attempt at censorship and the cancellation will stand as one of the great intellectual scandals of American history' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: xxxiii). Particularly because it was censorship that did not take place in the immediate aftermath of war, unlike that instituted by General MacArthur during the occupation of Japan. MacArthur went to great lengths to prevent journalists from reaching Hiroshima, going so far as cutting off supplies of gasoline to planes that might fly there, after suppressing the report of the first journalist who did reach the city in September (see Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 48ff.). But 20 years later, most American intellectuals have forgotten it; when pressed, most remember something vague about the Smithsonian and the Enola Gay. The media fallout, unlike its nuclear counterpart, had a very short half-life.

Who were the critics of the Smithsonian exhibit that never was? Like the critics of the Wehrmacht exhibit, many were veterans who felt their wartime service and suffering were being discredited. Fifty years after the war, what remained were personal memories far more emotionally potent than any historian's finding. As in Germany, veterans' raw emotions were amplified by right-wing political parties with an agenda. Even the agendas were not unsimilar: turning back what was perceived as the rising influence of the anti-authoritarian '60s generation. Lynne Cheney, wife of the not yet notorious Dick Cheney, wrote an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal* denouncing a group 'gripped by a great hatred for traditional history and intent on pursuing a revisionist agenda in the name of political correctness' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 332). She was director of the National Endowment for the Humanities at the time, and as such intent on heating up the culture wars taking place in the '90s. Those wars grew particularly heated over interpretations of the US past, interpretations which, it has been argued, served Republicans looking for an agenda in the wake of the suddenly defunct Cold War (see Dean, 2006).

It's disturbing to note that, whatever their stand on the culture wars, most media supported the attacks on the exhibit. The *Wall Street Journal* had no qualms about printing editorials that spoke of 'diabolical revisionists'; the *Washington Post*, substituting scorn-imparting scare quotes for religiously-tinged invective, wrote of 'the zealots of academe who prowl the liberal arts departments muttering against "American imperialism"'. (The newspaper articles collected in Bird and Lifschultz, (1998) are hair-raising; see pp. 403

and 396.) Even the *New York Times*, which had voiced concerns about censorship, felt compelled to smear the exhibit's creators as ideological idiots with a cartoon depicting the Enola Gay bearing the label 'Built by oppressed female workers and piloted by the white male establishment' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 286).

Veterans, Republican politicians, and rightward-leaning media all had interests in criticizing the exhibit, but the major catalyst for criticism was the Air Force Association, which describes itself as a veterans' organization. But:

The AFA, in fact, is the air wing of what Dwight Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex. It was founded in 1946 . . . to lobby for the creation of an independent air force, to fight postwar budget cutbacks, and to 'keep our country rigorously aroused to the urgent importance of air power'. (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 328)

Rather like its even more powerful cousin, the National Rifle Association, the AFA purports to defend the rights of arms owners while serving the interests of arms dealers.

The AFA had lobbied for the creation of the museum, which opened in 1976; it occasionally came under fire for being 'a giant advertisement for air and space technology' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 330). Harwit had already aroused the AFA's ire for creating exhibits that were genuinely historical rather than simply celebratory, changing the direction of a museum the AFA regarded as its baby. Its campaign against the exhibit was thus designed to embarrass the Smithsonian and replace the director with someone who simply wanted to showcase shiny hardware (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 362). All this took place against the background of cutbacks in military budgets at the end of the Cold War, whether 'demanded by the liberal community or by other branches of the military; in fighting the exhibit the AFA was fighting for its image in an age of imperilled budgets and reduced political clout' (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 328).

Thus veterans, military-industrial leaders, Republican cultural warriors and receptive media all fought to stop the exhibit as it was originally planned. They prevailed because the problems raised by the exhibit were not merely historical:

The discovery of an unknown perspective so fundamentally at odds with the orthodox formulation could be sufficient to legitimize a critical reassessment of not only the bombing of Hiroshima, but America's continued reliance on nuclear deterrence and key assumptions about the origins of the Cold War. (Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: xxxvii)

With the implications so sweeping, it may not be surprising that there was no serious political opposition. In announcing Clinton and Gore's support for the cancellation of the exhibit, a White House press spokesman wrote that:

The president and the vice president are very sensitive to the concerns expressed by veterans' groups and others about the exhibit itself. While they believe firmly that academic freedom has its place they nonetheless felt that some of the concerns expressed by veterans' groups had merit.

## III

Who has the right to make comparisons? This is not a trivial question. Comparisons between German war crimes and Allied bombing of civilians were frequently made in occupied Germany. While the focus was usually on the firebombings of Hamburg and Dresden, which Germans had experienced directly, references to the 'atomic holocaust of the Japanese' still occur today in Germany and Austria, but only among those whose political allegiances tilt right. Those comparisons have always been a central part of the attempt to exonerate Germany by arguing that Wehrmacht war crimes were no worse than those of the Allies, Nazi genocide no worse than the European extermination of Native Americans. Such comparisons are made as a way of avoiding responsibility for the Nazi era. In the Adenauer years, reparations payments to the state of Israel and support for US Cold War policies were substitutes for the process of national self-examination that began to take place in the later '60s. But as the anti-nuclear movement grew in the early '60s, a number of left-wing German writers, including some assimilated Jews returned from exile, began to compare Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Robert Jungk wrote:

Tomorrow – if, indeed, any of us survive to see a tomorrow – the protagonists of atomic armed forces and their mathematically calculated doctrine of mass murder will be condemned before the bar of world history exactly as Hitler and his fallacious doctrines have been condemned today. But by then, condemnation will have come too late. (Jungk, 'Foreword', in Anders and Eatherly, 1962)

The philosopher Gunther Anders made the comparison more exact. If our interest lies in measuring the depravity of a human soul, a concentration camp guard who is capable of putting children into a gas chamber is worse than a pilot who is capable of dropping a bomb on children he will never see. If our interest is in understanding which one threatens human life more, we must focus on the pilot.<sup>6</sup>

Hannah Arendt never commented directly on the comparisons made by Anders, to whom she was briefly married; like most other philosophers she had little to say about Hiroshima at all.<sup>7</sup> But she did comment on the comparison between Auschwitz and Hiroshima made by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in correspondence later published in the German magazine *Merkur* (1965). Arendt insists on the difference between the two events that have come to be denoted by place names: while Hiroshima has shown that modern technology makes it impossible to distinguish between war and crime, Auschwitz had nothing to do with war at all. More importantly for present purposes, she wrote that she was suspicious when a German compares the two events because 'it means that not our fathers but all men prepared the catastrophe, which is simply not true, and precisely in Germany very popular and dangerous'. The young writer admired the philosopher, and refusing to be grouped together with right-wing apologists, answered promptly that while only an imbecile would deny that Germans alone are responsible for Auschwitz, 'we have not only to think of our fathers but also our brothers and sons; not only of the guilt of those who are older than we but also, indeed principally, of the guilt that we bring on ourselves' (*Merkur*, 1965: 382). Impressed with Enzensberger's letter, Arendt responded that he was right to criticize her *argumentum ad nationem*, at least in

the short form in which she had made it, but went on to express the very justified concern that: 'In Germany, alas, any talk of the "Final Solution" has direct political implications and consequences. With Germans it is unavoidable that interests are in play in these discussions that are absent elsewhere' (*Merkur*, 1965: 384).

Arendt's concern is still valid. A German who compares Auschwitz and Hiroshima is excusing the former. An American who does so is not. I've chosen to abide by Tzvetan Todorov's injunction: Germans should talk about the particularity of the Holocaust, Jews should talk about its universality. This will only seem troubling to those who think statements are exhausted by their truth content. In fact, as ordinary language philosophy has taught us, statements are often forms of action. A German who talks about the particularity of the Holocaust is taking responsibility; a German who talks of its universality is denying it. In making an implicit comparison between Auschwitz and Hiroshima by examining the very different ways each country has worked through its national crimes, I write as a Jewish American who is appalled at her country's refusal to take the first step towards responsibility for Hiroshima – which would demand that educated Americans acquire the basic general knowledge of it that they have of Auschwitz.

Compared to the German (though not the Austrian) process of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, the American is positively primitive. Consider the ways of avoiding confronting one's nation's crimes. The first is to cite *force majeure*, insisting that extraordinary circumstances overwhelmed other moral obligations. By continuing to insist that the bomb saved lives that would otherwise have been lost, Stimson and Truman not only appealed to *force majeure*, but placed the bombing in the realm of virtue rather than crime. The continued inflation of the number of lives saved – ¼ million while Truman was in the White House, ½ million shortly after he left it – was a way of inflating the morality of the bombing: 'the more lives saved, the greater the virtue' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 180). Perhaps it's no surprise that after decades of such propaganda – for so we must call it – a US Congressman could write to the Secretary of the Smithsonian in the midst of the controversy over the exhibit: 'There is no excuse for an exhibit which addresses *one of the most morally unambiguous events of the 20th century* to need five revisions' (in Bird and Lifschultz, 1998: 328, their emphasis).

It's true that Heinrich Himmler's infamous speech to SS officers at Posen tried to describe genocide as a difficult but necessary – and therefore particularly moral – act, but the speech is justly infamous, and only old Nazis, of which there are blessedly fewer every year, maintain that Jews posed a genuine threat to Germany. Less criticized but far more prevalent is the anti-communist rhetoric we saw at work in criticisms of the Wehrmacht Exhibit: *our soldiers had no choice but to be ruthless while defending their homes from the ruthless Bolshevik onslaught*. To discuss the ways in which weakened forms of this claim still infect German political culture would lead beyond the scope of this essay. In the strong form expressed above, such claims were put to rest with the Wehrmacht Exhibit, and are no longer considered acceptable in mainstream political culture, though the fringes where they are expressed are surely larger than they should be.

A second way of avoiding responsibility for national crimes is to insist on one's own victimization. Thus criticism of the decision to drop the bomb could be met by reference

to the Bataan death march or other Japanese war crimes, which critics of the planned Smithsonian exhibit insisted on including and continually expanding. This was described as a matter of putting the bombing in context, but it was in fact a way of justifying it by insisting that American soldiers suffered more, longer, and worse. There is no denying that the Japanese committed war crimes (though more were committed in China than elsewhere) nor that a kamikaze cult that encouraged suicidal attacks as a particularly noble form of warfare must have terrified American troops on the ground.<sup>8</sup> But the men who planned the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as we've seen, knew that the kamikaze attacks were last, desperate gestures. Their decision was not made in a moment of fear; rather, the understandable fears of the troops have been used as later justification for a decision that had nothing to do with them.

Emphasizing one's own victimhood in order to deflect attention from the victims one has created was a common feature of the Adenauer era, when Germans commonly viewed themselves as the war's greatest victims. *It is, after all, our cities that lay in ruins, our men killed or suffering as prisoners of war; and on top of everything else we had to endure, the Allies insisted on making us feel guilty!* In the '50s, the voices that insisted on recalling that German bombing of Coventry and London preceded Allied bombing of Hamburg and Dresden were marginal ones; the majority preferred to ignore the causal relation. Not until 1985 did a German president, Richard Weiszacker, describe the end of the war as a day of liberation rather than defeat. Since that time, the view that since Germany started the war it should be considered primarily a perpetrator, not a victim – always the official view in East Germany – has become the dominant one in the West and thus in the reunified country as a whole.

As we saw earlier, the view that examining national misdeeds is disloyal or unpatriotic was voiced in relation to both exhibits. In Germany, however, the voices expressing that view were not powerful enough to prevent the exhibit; in the US they were fatal. Most citizens of other countries are surprised to learn that the Wehrmacht Exhibit caused such dramatic reactions within Germany at the end of the 20th century. Outside Germany, the claim that the Wehrmacht committed war crimes is about as controversial as the claim that the earth is round. But most citizens of countries other than the US would be equally surprised to learn that members of the US Congress could call the bombing of Hiroshima *morally unambiguous* – and receive so little opposition. That the bombing must at the very least be considered morally *ambiguous* is as much a matter of international consensus as the claim that Auschwitz was evil.

Most interesting, however, is another kind of strategy to deflect attention from national crimes, namely attending to the moral goodness, or at least the ordinary decency, of the people responsible for them. It is striking how many American thinkers who criticize Truman's decision to drop the bomb rush to assure their leaders that, apart from this decision, Truman was a good man and president. While it's always a good idea to avoid demonizing one's opponents, the insistence on the goodness of Harry Truman's character is puzzling. Are such assurances meant to modify our condemnation of his decision? Hasn't the voluminous research on the ordinary men who carried out the crimes of the Nazi era shown that evil actions can be committed by the most decent of people with the most harmless of motives? Even Lifton and Mitchell's *Hiroshima in*

*America*, the most profound and important book on the subject, insists on praising Truman when examining the factors that led him to order the bombing.

Harry S. Truman was a good man, a loving man, who made a decision to use the cruellest weapon in human history on a heavily populated city and then spent much of his remaining years defending that decision. (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 117)

Several facts presented by Lifton and Mitchell themselves raise questions about Truman's goodness: his reported 'exuberance' while making the announcement that the bomb had been dropped, after which he attended a comedy revue 'bellylaughing at the entertainment'; his description of Oppenheimer as 'the crybaby scientist' after Oppenheimer visited him in late 1945 to urge the need for international control of nuclear weapons, saying, 'Mr. President, I have blood on my hands'; or his joke at the Washington Gridiron dinner about appointing a secretary of reaction: 'What a load he'll take off my mind if he'll put the atom back together so it can't be broken up!' (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 158, 168, 191).

The latter may remind the attentive reader of George W. Bush's jokes (at the same venue decades later) about seeking behind the curtain those weapons of mass destruction that formed the pretext for his invasion of Iraq. Gallows humour is admirable for someone standing in its shadow, but there is nothing admirable about jokes made by the hangman. Still, how admirable Harry Truman was or was not is irrelevant to our judgement of his decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and two generations' worth of discussion of the banality of evil would lead the majority of Germans today to reject any appeal to the private virtues of Nazi leaders as absolutely incidental to our understanding and judgement of their public actions. (For my own view on the banality of evil see Neiman (2002). While Arendt's judgement of Eichmann, which formed the basis for her discussion of the banality of evil (and hence my own) has been superseded by Bettina Stangneth's superb *Eichmann before Jerusalem*, the claim that the evils which most threaten us arise out of banal rather than demonic motives still stands; it happens not to have been true of Adolf Eichmann.)

Why do we in the West know exponentially more about Auschwitz than we know about Hiroshima? Any minimally educated person will have a rough but generally accurate grasp of the events that took place in the Second World War's European theatre; a mixture of secondary school education and an unending stream of popular movies, television and radio programmes insures that you needn't be a historian to know basic facts about Auschwitz. Indeed, to avoid information about Auschwitz, you would need to have spent the last 30 years in a hermitage. By contrast, the amount of material available about the war in the Pacific, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is easy to overlook. The information is there – primarily in books and documents, far less in film or other media – but you have to seek it out. Or to put the matter differently: why is there an entire museum devoted to the Holocaust on the Washington Mall, while the Smithsonian was unable to hold even a temporary exhibit about Hiroshima?

I'll address the most common suspicion. There is indeed a Jewish lobby, more accurately known as AIPAC, which seeks to support right-wing Israeli governments who deflect responsibility for their own policies by emphasizing the ways in which Jews have been victims, particularly at the hands of the Nazis. And it's easy to argue that the Jews were wholly innocent victims in a way the Japanese were not. If ordinary Japanese



cannot be held entirely responsible for their government's racist and militarist policies, only a handful of Japanese communists actively objected to them, and emigration during the period was non-existent (Buruma, 1994). By contrast, even in Germany, small but definite resistance to the Nazis existed, and Marlene Dietrich and Hannah Arendt were but two of the thousands of emigrants, both voluntary and involuntary, who maintained a commitment to another Germany throughout the Nazi era. The fact that no such comparable Japanese contingent existed makes it harder to accept Japanese claims of victimhood – though no sane person would argue that the thousands of schoolchildren melted at Hiroshima did anything to deserve their fate.

The difference between Japanese and Jewish victimhood gives us one clue to the difference in the amount of attention paid to Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Not the fact that the heirs of Jewish victims are in a better medial position to emphasize their victimhood, but the fact that their victimhood was as unambiguous as could be imagined has led so many to focus on it. The focus is hardly confined to Jews, nor to serious media; it has long since reached the blogosphere. Google 'Auschwitz selfie' to see a blond Alabama teenager defend her grinning pose for a self-portrait in the concentration camp. 'The Holocaust is just the only thing that ever interested me in history', she draws. 'My parents said they would take me wherever I wanted when I graduated from high school. But my father died a year before that, so I went to Auschwitz in his memory.'

The Alabama teenager who calls the Holocaust the only thing that ever interested her in history is not, alas, alone. There may be no other event in recent history that has such simple dramatic properties. If the villains of the story were more complicated human beings than even the better Hollywood efforts, like *Schindler's List*, know how to portray, their crimes were as evil as any screenwriter could construct, and their victims entirely free of guilt for the fates they suffered. Even better, the Nazis lost the war, and while six million Jews were murdered in it, the people as a whole survived and flourished. Evil was punished, innocence rewarded. Such a narrative serves not just dramatic needs but, broadly speaking, religious ones. If the wicked suffer, and the good are saved, then the world as a whole makes sense (Neiman, 2002).

Whatever deep-seated religious needs the story of Auschwitz may serve, it clearly serves political ones. Focus on a crime that is, *pace* the aforementioned Congressman, in contrast to Hiroshima so truly morally unambiguous gives us a picture of absolute evil next to which any other example falls short. The repetition of images of ordinary people being herded first into boxcars and then into gas chambers makes us feel we know what real evil is, leaving everything else appearing merely unfortunate. The more we focus on simple models of evil, the less practice we have in recognizing more complicated ones. And it is the more complicated forms of evil that have dominated US foreign policy in the last 50 years, from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the disastrous invasion of Iraq.<sup>9</sup> The suppression of facts about Hiroshima has had more of an impact on our moral perception than we know how to acknowledge. Lifton and Mitchell write that Americans have a vague, unfelt, half-knowledge of Hiroshima that

increased ordinary Americans' sense of being out of control of their own destiny, of being out of control of the large forces that determined their future ... We have to ask ourselves

how much of our rising mistrust for politicians and officials of all kinds, for our government and just about all who govern us – how much this angry cynicism so evident in our public life in recent years is an outcome of the Hiroshima and post- Hiroshima nuclear deceptions and concealments. (Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 336)

I believe that not only the suppression of Hiroshima, but the focus on Auschwitz, has distorted our moral vision: like extremely near-sighted people we can only recognize large, bold objects; everything else remains vague and dim. I do not think this is accidental, but I do not think it is the work of those who claim to represent Jewish interests. Rather, it is US interests that are served by promoting a picture of evil that is so indisputably self-evident. Or to put the matter in psychoanalytic terms: the focus on Auschwitz is a form of displacement for what we don't want to know about Hiroshima.

#### IV

I will close with personal remarks. I began this essay with criticisms of two men from whom I learned a great deal, and it gives me no pleasure at all to attack them. Where I do so it is from the need to attack the profession of philosophy itself for its disinterest in the empirical world – perhaps no surprise given the room that proving the existence of that world has taken on the philosophical stage these past hundred years. Still, it was disappointing that two of the finest moral theorists of the 20th century, who in fact knew and cared a great deal about many events in history, failed to question official US justification of the decision to drop the bomb even as they were condemning that decision itself. This seemed to me a reflection of philosophy's general tendency to abstraction, but also of moral philosophy's emphasis on the *ought* as opposed to the *is*. While I hold this to be the most important distinction we ever draw, Hume's clam that we cannot derive *ought* from *is* is only technically correct. Hiroshima may show that we can derive an *ought* (or an *ought not*) from an *is*: if you put enough facts together they may be sufficient condemnation alone.<sup>10</sup>

My criticism of Rawls and Walzer *qua* philosophers is very much self-criticism. I was at least as ignorant of the facts about Hiroshima when I began to write this essay, and thought that a little empirical research would be a place to start. I wish I could say that the ignorance was a function of the poverty of philosophy, but in the course of studying the matter I began to ask a wide variety of friends and acquaintances what they knew about the decision to drop the bomb. I will not name names, for no one is guiltier of ignorance than I was, but they included historians, sociologists and journalists with decades of experience in questioning US policy and the justifications thereof. Only one of them gave something other than the official answer concocted by Conant and Stimson. As one of them put it after we had spoken at length: 'It's as if the Germans still believed the Jews started the war'. Another compared the suppression of the facts about Hiroshima to the sort of Soviet propaganda we rightly criticize.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, there is a difference. Soviet intellectuals knew when propaganda was propaganda. American (and many other western) intellectuals do not.

In the conflict over the Smithsonian exhibition, American anti-intellectualism triumphed: the emotions of veterans and the interests of Congress people were taken more seriously than the evidence of historians. While recognizing that anti-intellectualism has long been a force in American life, American intellectuals must look to our own failings if

we are to counter it successfully. A refusal to question official sources is only one part of the problem; intellectuals are as fascinated by the simple model of good and evil embodied at Auschwitz as anyone else is. If we, like others, need to learn to better perceive moral complexity, we also need to strive for linguistic clarity: the inability to write clear, unclouded prose has left many a thought inaccessible to all but the most dedicated graduate student. This essay is offered in the attempt to provide an alternative example.

## Notes

1. Leahy, for example, wrote that: 'It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material success in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons. . . . My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages (quoted in Walker, 1998: 398). Michael Gordin (2007), however, cautions that there is no record of Leahy voicing such a view before the bomb was dropped.
2. Both Walker and Gordin note that the Japanese government was divided; not every faction was interested in pursuing peace. Given the reverence known to be felt for the emperor, however, it can only be assumed that his voice would be decisive.
3. George Kennan urged Stimson and Bundy to delete crucial passages of Stimson's co-authored autobiography, *On Active Service*, which emphasized US interest in intimidating the Russians. Kennan wrote: 'I am afraid that if these statements were now to appear in an official biography of Mr. Stimson, a part of the reading public might conclude that the hope of influencing Russia by the threat of atomic attack had been, and probably remained, one of the permanently motivating elements of our foreign policy. Such an impression would play squarely into the hands of the Communists who so frequently speak of our "atomic diplomacy"' (quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 111).
4. As Louis Menand has written, what's extraordinary about the construction of the Stimson article is not 'that a statesman should wish to fix the record most favorably on himself . . . What is remarkable is that the president of the country's leading institution of liberal learning, having set in motion a process leading to the publication of the facts about an event, should intervene in order to censor details he judged it undesirable for the public to learn' (cited in Lifton and Mitchell, 1995: 100).
5. See *Eine Ausstellung und ihre Folgen: Zur Rezeption der Ausstellung, Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburger Edition, 1999), a book published by the Hamburg Institute itself that documents some of the articles and films that were made about the exhibit.
6. As Anders did, in his well-known correspondence with Hiroshima weather pilot Claude Eatherly. Later evidence suggests that Anders may have been misled by Eatherly, whose mental illness probably had causes other than guilt at having played a role in dropping the bomb. But mental illnesses are rarely monocausal, and Anders' interest in understanding what role moral questions played in Eatherly's illness still makes the correspondence compelling reading.
7. Bettina Stangneth speculates that Arendt thought about Hiroshima 'from a German perspective: since the Germans would have been happy to celebrate Hiroshima as an excuse for Auschwitz by dancing in the streets, Arendt and Jaspers tried to be as restrained as possible' (Stangneth, private correspondence, 19 October 2014).
8. The kamikaze pilots were only the most dramatic form of suicide warfare, which included boats and so-called human torpedos. While Nazi Germany stressed the obligation to fight for

the Führer, it did not ennoble dying for him as such; soldiers were sent to the Eastern Front as punishment.

9. The phenomenon that the English call Kraut-bashing has a somewhat different form, but it serves a similar function: the repetitive and demonized focus on Nazi crimes makes the more complex crimes of British imperialism recede from view.
10. Gunther Anders, the only philosopher to have made the atomic bomb central to his thought, also suffered from a lack of attention to the empirical. Compare his reflections in his visit to Hiroshima in his *Hiroshima ist überall* to Robert Jay Lifton's interviews in his *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*; the exact descriptions of events by survivors are more powerful condemnation than Anders' reflections.
11. See also Bird and Lifschultz: 'Throughout the Cold War, Americans routinely mocked the crude Stalinist revisions of history in which images of Trotsky or Bukharin, among others, could be removed from museums, books and even photos where they had stood beside Lenin ... The censorship at the Smithsonian entered boldly and without shame into this ignominious intellectual terrain' (1998: xxxiv).

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