



Nicholson Baker. *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. 566 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4165-6784-4.



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Smoke and Mirrors

Human Smoke has garnered numerous book reviews and considerable attention. Much of this flutter is a consequence of Nicholson Baker's literary reputation and most of the reviews have focused on the literary merits of the book. This review, however, will focus on the relevance of this book to historians in terms of historical research and value for teaching. Although the book is replete with historical anecdotes and is readable, as history it is unsuccessful. A. J. P. Taylor did a far superior job of challenging our understanding of the war forty years ago.[1] *Human Smoke* consists of accounts of separate items placed in chronological order beginning in 1892 and ending in December 1941. Baker presents neither connecting explanations nor clarifications for the items. His purpose is to question the assumption that World War II was a good war.

In his afterword, Baker states that "the New York Times is probably the single richest resource for the history and prehistory of the war years" (p. 473). The notes confirm that Baker worked following this bias, although he does supplement the *Times* with secondary sources.

At the very least, a reliance on a single newspaper for understanding events creates distortions, particularly for a work that purports to take a global view of World War II's origins. A general lack of other primary sources leads one to suspect that a nuanced understanding of the context of events leading up to the war is lacking. As a result, Baker has cobbled together a series of interesting and largely disconnected snippets, from which the reader is asked to make meaningful judgments. Some might argue that this is a powerful and innovative literary technique, and perhaps it has the virtue of reflecting the difficulty we have in understanding current events through the lens of the media, but it also points to intellectual laziness on the part of the author.

For most historians, the process of researching and writing involves collecting data, in the past, customarily in the form of index cards, putting them in some sort of order, and then explaining the significance of the sequence. *Human Smoke* gets as far as putting the cards in order, but does not engage with the meaning. Indeed, the organization fetishizes chronological order and has little

other discernable intellectual structure. Hidden and unexplained are all the pieces of information that Baker did not select. Absent is any web of analysis that makes sense of the information. The snippets themselves are interesting, but taken as a whole are devoid of meaning.

The lack of analysis stems in part from the lack of context. Each page presents two to three items, none of which comes with any background. Any connective tissue derives from the accumulation of events. Early in the book, for example, Baker cites Winston Churchill, his favorite *bÂte noire*, fulminating about the “‘international conspiracy’ of international Jewry” in the 1920s (p. 6). To be sure, Churchill said this, but he also said a lot of other things about Jews. He supported the Zionist movement and many of his peers considered him a philosemite. It is never made explicitly clear why Baker focuses on this quote and the reader is left with the misleading notion that this statement characterized Churchill’s thinking on Jews.

A related problem is Baker’s rather surprising insensitivity to the rhetoric of war. When politicians and public figures talk or write about war while it is going on (or about to break out), one must be especially careful about identifying the purpose and the audience. Was speech officially restricted, or were there hidden parameters on acceptable discourse? Who was the author trying to reach? One-off comments of an extreme nature abound in *Human Smoke*. Even if some of them were sincerely meant, others might have played the role of ratcheting up personal or collective courage, or perhaps reveal their authors succumbing to a transient sentiment. Baker cites a philosopher’s conversation in the fall of 1939 with a female acquaintance who wanted to “make a real Carthaginian peace” and “kill off one out of every five German women, so that they stopped breeding so

many little Huns” (p. 155). Probably statements like this were common, but one cannot help but wonder if overheated rhetoric reflected a desire to show commitment to the war effort or was a reaction to a particular event. As it stands, this quote suggests a pervasive will to read the exceptional oddment as the standard.

The book sets the evil of bombing against the moral purity of the pacifists. Repeatedly, Baker shows political and economic leaders enthusiastically embracing the bombing of civilians. Although he is somewhat successful at demonstrating the moral bankruptcy of the rush to bomb, he loses his point by not addressing why bombing was so important. Was Churchill, for example, in favor of bombing civilians because he suffered from some sort of bloodlust, or did he want to win the war as quickly as possible? Pacifists are not dealt with any more critically. When Mahatma Ghandi claims that if he were a German Jew, he would “refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment,” Baker does not wonder whether such laudable nonviolence would work against leaders who were already committed to annihilation (p. 106).

Perhaps letting the examples speak for themselves is sufficient. To be fair, at times the juxtaposition of quotes is thought-provoking, and the reader has the liberty to draw his or her own conclusions from any given snippet. The sum of the parts, however, never becomes anything more than the result of a simple, if fragmented, arithmetic.

Note

[1]. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; originally published in 1961).

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