

WHY I'M A PACIFIST

The dangerous myth of the Good War
By Nicholson Baker

Six months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Abraham Kaufman, the executive secretary of the War Resisters League, stood up in the auditorium of the Union Methodist Church in Manhattan and said something that was difficult to say. Kaufman, a man of thirty-three who had put himself through City College at night and had worked Sundays selling magazines and candy in a subway station, insisted that we needed peace now—and that to get peace now, we needed to negotiate with Hitler. “This tremendous war can be ended by just one small spark of truth and sanity,” he said.

To those who argued that you couldn't negotiate with Hitler, Kaufman replied that the Allies were already

Nicholson Baker's most recent book is The Anthologist, a novel. He lives in Maine with his family.



end of the First World War: a peace without victory. “We ask for peace now,” Kaufman said, “while there is still a world to discuss aims, not when it is too late.”

What explained Kaufman's urgency? It was simple: he didn't want any more people to suffer and die. Civilian massacres and military horrors were reported daily, and Kaufman feared that the war would prove to be, as he'd written to the *New York Times* two years earlier, “so disastrous as to make the 1917 adventure seem quite mild.” He understood exactly what was at stake. In his view, a negotiat-

ed peace with Hitler was, paradoxically, the best chance the Allies had of protecting the world from Hitler's last-ditch, exterminative frenzy.

negotiating with Hitler, and with Japan too—over prisoners of war, for example, and the sending of food to Greece. It was important to confer *right away*, Kaufman believed, before either side had lost. Our aim should be what Woodrow Wilson had hoped for at the

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Kaufman was one of a surprisingly vocal group of World War II pacifists—absolute pacifists, who

were opposed to any war service. They weren't, all of them, against personal or familial self-defense, or against law enforcement. But they did hold that war was, in the words of the British pacifist and parliamentarian Arthur Ponsonby, "a monster born of hypocrisy, fed on falsehood, fattened on humbug, kept alive by superstition, directed to the death and torture of millions, succeeding in no high purpose, degrading to humanity, endangering civilization

their principled opposition to that enormous war—the war that Hitler began—but I do think you will want to take their position seriously, and see for yourself whether there was some wisdom in it.

Praising pacifists—using the P-word in any positive way, but especially in connection with the Second World War—embarrasses some people, and it makes some people angry. I found this out in

over my book obsessively, for hours at a time—and she hated it. "By the time I finished," she wrote, "I felt something I had never felt before: fury at pacifists." Pollitt's displeasure hurt, as negative reviews from thoughtful readers generally do. But I still think the pacifists of World War II were right. In fact, the more I learn about the war, the more I understand that the pacifists were the only ones, during a time of catastrophic violence, who repeatedly put forward proposals that had any chance of



and bringing forth in its travail a hideous brood of strife, conflict and war, more war." Along with Kaufman and Ponsonby—and thousands of conscientious objectors who spent time in jail, in rural work camps, in hospitals, or in controlled starvation studies—the ranks of wartime pacifists included Vera Brittain, Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, Dorothy Day, and Jessie Wallace Hughan.

I admire these people. They believed in acts of mercy rather than in fist-shaking vows of retribution. They kept their minds on who was actually in trouble. They suffered, some in small ways, some in large, for what they did and said. They were, I think, beautiful examples of what it means to be human. I don't expect you to agree, necessarily, that they were right in

2008, when I published a book about the beginnings of the war. *Human Smoke* was a mosaic of contradictory fragments and moments in time, composed largely of quotations: it made no direct arguments on behalf of any single interpretation of World War II. But in an afterword, I dedicated the book to the memory of Clarence Pickett—a Quaker relief worker—and other British and American pacifists, because I was moved by what they'd tried to do. "They tried to save Jewish refugees," I wrote, "feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan, and stop the war from happening. They failed, but they were right."

They were *what*? In a review in *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt said she pored

saving a threatened people. They weren't naive, they weren't unrealistic—they were psychologically acute realists.

Who was in trouble in Europe? Jews were, of course. Hitler had, from the very beginning of his political career, fantasized publicly about killing Jews. They must go, he said, they must be wiped out—he said so in the 1920s, he said so in the 1930s, he said so throughout the war (when they were in fact being wiped out), and in his bunker in 1945, with a cyanide pill and a pistol in front of him, his hands shaking from Parkinson's, he closed his last will and testament with a final paranoid expostulation, condemning "the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry."

Throughout Hitler's tenure, then, the question for the rest of the world was how to respond to a man who was (a) violent; (b) highly irrational; (c) vehemently racist; (d) professedly suicidal; and (e) in charge of an expanding empire. One possibility was to build weapons and raise armies, make demands, and threaten sanctions, embargoes, and other punishments. If Hitler failed to comply, we could say, "This has gone too far," and declare war.

Pacifists thought this was precisely the wrong response. "The Government took the one course which I foresaw at the time would strengthen Hitler: they declared war on Germany," Arthur Ponsonby said in the House of Lords in 1940. The novelist Vera Brittain, who published a biweekly *Letter to Peace Lovers* in London, agreed. "Nazism thrives, as we see repeatedly, on every policy which provokes resistance, such as bombing, blockade, and threats of 'retribution,'" she wrote in her masterful 1942 polemic, *Humiliation with Honour*.

The Jews needed immigration visas, not Flying Fortresses. And who was doing their best to get them visas, as well as food, money, and hiding places? Pacifists were. Bertha Bracey helped arrange the *Kindertransport*, for example, which saved the lives of some 10,000 Jewish children; Runham Brown and Grace Beaton of the War Resisters International organized the release of Jews and other political prisoners from Dachau and Buchenwald; and André Trocmé and Burns Chalmers hid Jewish children among families in the South of France.

"We've got to fight Hitlerism" sounds good, because Hitler was so self-evidently horrible. But what fighting Hitlerism meant in practice was, largely, the five-year-long Churchillian experiment of undermining German "morale" by dropping magnesium firebombs and 2,000-pound blockbusters on various city centers. The firebombing killed and displaced a great many innocent people—including Jews in hiding—and obliterated entire neighborhoods. It was supposed to cause an anti-Nazi revolution, but it didn't. "The victims are stunned, exhausted, apathetic, absorbed in the immediate

tasks of finding food and shelter," wrote Brittain in 1944. "But when they recover, who can doubt that there will be, among the majority at any rate, the desire for revenge and a hardening process—even if, for a time, it may be subdued by fear?" If you drop things on people's heads, they get angry and unite behind their leader. This was, after all, just what had happened during the Blitz in London.

"Even so," you may say, "I don't like the word 'pacifist.' If somebody came after me or someone I loved, I'd grab a baseball bat, or a gun, and I'd fight him off." Of course you would. I would, too. In fact, that's exactly what I said in college to my girlfriend—who's now my wife—when she announced that she was a pacifist. I also said, What about Hitler?

She made two observations: that her father had served in World War II and had come back a pacifist, and that sending off a lot of eighteen-year-old boys to kill and wound other eighteen-year-old boys wasn't the way to oppose Hitler. I said, Well, what other way was there? Nonviolent resistance, she replied. I wasn't persuaded. Still, her willingness to defend her position made a permanent notch, an opening, in my ethical sense.

Next came my brief, insufferable Young Republican phase. For a year, just out of college, I worked on Wall Street, at a company called L. F. Rothschild, Unterberg, Towbin. (They're gone now.) I became a confused but cocky neoconservative. I subscribed to *Commentary*, enthralled by its brilliant pugnacity. I read F. A. Hayek, Irving Kristol, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Karl Popper, Robert Nozick, and Edmund Burke.

I wasn't interested in wars, because wars are sad and wasteful and miserable-making, and battleships and gold epaulettes are ridiculous. But I was excited by the notion of free markets, by the information-conveying subtlety of daily price adjustments, and I thought, Heck, if *Commentary* is right about F. A. Hayek, maybe they're right about fighting Communism too. Surely we had to have hardened missile silos and Star Wars satellites and battalions of Abrams tanks. And the

winning of World War II was unquestionably a plume in our cap, was it not? We'd stepped into the fray; we'd turned the tide of battle. At that point I put aside political thought altogether. It was beyond me. Its prose was bad. I concentrated on writing about what struck me as funny and true.

Then came the Gulf War. I'd just finished writing an upbeat novel about phone sex. My wife and I watched Operation Desert Storm on TV, while it was actually happening. Peter Arnett and Bernard Shaw were up on the roof of the Hotel Al-Rasheed in Baghdad. We saw the tracer fire sprout up over that enormous complicated green city with its ancient name, and we saw the slow toppling of the communication tower, which looked like Seattle's Space Needle, and then, within hours (or so I remember it), we were shown grainy black-and-white clips of precision-guided bombs as they descended toward things that looked like blank, cast-concrete bunkers. Soundless explosions followed. Wolf Blitzer seemed unfazed by it all.

I thought: People are probably dying down there. They can't not be. There was something awful in being able to witness feats of violent urban destruction as they unfolded—to know that big things that had been unbroken were now broken, and that human beings were mutilated and moaning who had been whole—and to comprehend that I was, simply by virtue of being a compliant part of my country's tax base, paying for all this unjustifiable, night-visioned havoc.

Afterward we learned that those early "surgical" strikes had gone astray, some of them, and had killed and wounded large numbers of civilians. We also learned that there were many thousands of bombing runs, or "sorties"—such a clean-sounding word—and that only about 10 percent of the flights had employed "smart" weaponry. Most of the bombing of Iraq in those years, it turned out, was just as blind and dumb as the carpet bombings of World War II. There was, however, a new type of incendiary weapon in use: depleted-uranium shells, fired from Gatling guns and helicopter gunships, which became unstoppably heavy burning spears that vaporized metal on contact, leaving behind a

wind-borne dust that some said caused birth defects and cancers. Then came the medical blockade, years of it, and punitive bombings. What President Bush began, President Clinton continued. I thought, No, I'm sorry, this makes no sense. I don't care what *Commentary* says: this is not right.

Later still, I saw a documentary on PBS called *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*, about the State Department's despicable blockage of visas for Jewish refugees, which permanently broke my trust in Franklin Roosevelt. Then Bill Clinton's Air Force bombed Belgrade. They used the BLU-114/B "soft-bomb," which flung a fettuccine of short-circuiting filaments over power stations in order to bring on massive blackouts, and they also dropped a lot of conventional explosives from high altitudes, killing hundreds of people. And then, in 2002, we bombed Afghanistan, using 15,000-pound "daisy cutters," and killed more people; and then we bombed Iraq again and destroyed more power plants and killed more people—wedding parties, invalids sleeping in their beds. And as we debated the merits of each of these attacks, we inevitably referred back to our touchstone, our exemplar: the Second World War.

War is messy, we say. It's not pretty, but let's be real—it has to be fought sometimes. Cut to the image of a handsome unshaven G.I., somewhere in Italy or France, with a battered helmet and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. World War II, the most lethally violent eruption in history, is pacifism's great smoking counterexample. We "had to" intervene in Korea, Vietnam, and wherever else, because *look at World War II*. In 2007, in an article for *Commentary* called "The Case for Bombing Iran," Norman Podhoretz drew a parallel between negotiating with Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and negotiating with Hitler: we must bomb Iran now, he suggested, because *look at World War II*.

True, the Allies killed millions of civilians and absurdly young conscripts, and they desolated much of Europe and Japan—that was genuinely sad. But what about the Holo-

caust? We had to push back somehow against that horror.

Yes, we did. But the way you push is everything.

The Holocaust was, among many other things, the biggest hostage crisis of all time. Hostage-taking was Hitler's preferred method from the beginning. In 1923, he led a group of ultranationalists into a beer hall in Munich and, waving a gun, held government officials prisoner. In 1938, after Kristallnacht, he imprisoned thousands of Jews, releasing them only after the Jewish community paid a huge ransom. In occupied France, Holland, Norway, and Yugoslavia, Jews were held hostage and often executed in reprisal for local partisan activity.

By 1941, as Congress was debating the Lend-Lease Act, which would provide military aid to Britain and other Allies, the enormity of the risk became clear, if it wasn't already, to anyone who could read a newspaper. On February 28, 1941, the *New York Times* carried a troubling dispatch from Vienna: "Many Jews here believe that Jews throughout Europe will be more or less hostages against the United States' entry into the war. Some fear that even an appreciable amount of help for Britain from the United States may precipitate whatever plan the Reichsfuehrer had in mind when, in recent speeches, he spoke of the elimination of Jews from Europe 'under certain circumstances.'"

In response to this threat, *The American Hebrew*, a venerable weekly, ran a defiant front-page editorial. "Reduced to intelligibility this message, which obviously derives from official sources, warns that unless America backs down, the Jews in Germany will be butchered," the paper said. So be it. The editorial went on:

We shall continue, nay, we shall increase our efforts to bring about the downfall of the cutthroat regime that is tyrannizing the world, and we are not blind to the price we may have to pay for our determination. But no sacrifice can be too great, no price too dear, if we can help rid the world of the little Austrian messiah and his tribe, and all they stand for.

Other Jews, a minority, disagreed. ("In wars it is the minorities that are generally right," Ponsonby once said.) In 1941, Rabbi Cronbach, of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, began talking to Rabbi Isidor B. Hoffman, a friendly, bald, hard-to-ruffle student counselor at Columbia University, and Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Omaha, Nebraska, about forming a Jewish Peace Fellowship. The fellowship would help support Jewish conscientious objectors who were then in alternative-service camps or prisons, and it would, according to the first issue of its newsletter, *Tidings*, "strengthen the devotion to pacifism of self-respecting, loyal Jews."

"Crony" Cronbach became the honorary chairman of the Jewish Peace Fellowship. He was a fine-boned man, always in a suit and tie, and he had a horror of vengeance as an instrument of national policy. He'd seen what happened in the Great War. "People of gentleness, refinement, and idealism became, in the war atmosphere, hyenas raging to assault and kill not merely the foreign foe but equally their own dissenting countrymen," he recalled in his 1937 book, *The Quest for Peace*. By supporting the earlier conflict, he suggested, America's Jews had "only helped prepare the way for the Nazi horror which has engulfed us."

The American middle class, still dimly recalling the trenches, the mud, the rats, the typhus, and the general obscene futility of World War I, was perhaps slightly closer to Cronbach's pacifism than to Roosevelt's interventionism—until December 7, 1941. Once Pearl Harbor's Battleship Row burned and sank, the country cried for the incineration of Tokyo.

The false-flag "peace" groups, such as America First, disbanded immediately; the absolute pacifists stuck to their principles. At the War Resisters League headquarters on Stone Street in Manhattan, the executive committee members (including Edward P. Gottlieb, a schoolteacher who had changed his middle name to "Pacifist") published a post-Pearl Harbor flyer that called for an early negotiated peace "on the basis of benefit and deliverance for all the peoples of the earth." The flyer got a good response, and won them some new enrollees; only a few angry letters came in, one written on toilet

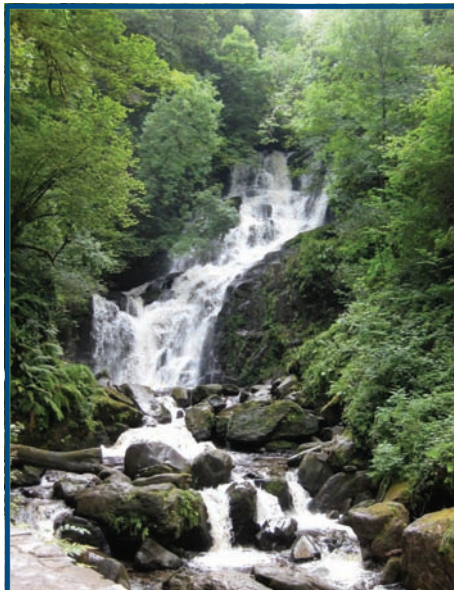
paper. The FBI visited the offices and began making a series of what Kaufman called “exhaustive inquiries.”

Meanwhile, Hitler’s anti-Semitism had reached a final stage of Götterdämmerungian psychosis. As boxcars of war-wounded, frostbitten German soldiers returned from the Russian front, and as it became obvious to everyone that the United States was entering the war, Hitler, his arm tremor now evident to his associates, made an unprecedented number of vitriolic threats to European Jewry in close succession—some in speeches, and some in private meetings. (The Jew, Hitler now claimed, was a *Weltbrandstifter*, a world arsonist.) A number of Holocaust historians—among them Saul Friedländer, Peter Longerich, Christian Gerlach, and Roderick Stackelberg—have used this concentration of “exterminatory statements” (the phrase is Friedländer’s) to date, in the absence of any written order, Hitler’s decision to radically accelerate the Final Solution.

The shift, Friedländer writes, came in late 1941, occasioned by the event that transformed a pan-European war into a world war: “the entry of the United States into the conflict.” As Stackelberg puts it: “Although the ‘Final Solution,’ the decision to kill all the Jews under German control, was planned well in advance, its full implementation may have been delayed until the U.S. entered the war. Now the Jews under German control had lost their potential value as hostages.”

In any case, on December 12, 1941, Hitler confirmed his intentions in a talk before Goebbels and other party leaders. In his diary, Goebbels later summarized the Führer’s remarks: “The world war is here. The annihilation of the Jews must be the necessary consequence.”

Chelmno, the first killing factory, had already commenced operation on December 8, 1941: Jews from the ghetto in the Polish town of Kolo were suffocated with exhaust gasses in sealed trucks. Beginning in March 1942, the Lublin ghetto was liquidated: Jews by the thousands were taken to a second extermination camp, Belzec, and gassed there. More Jews, including orphaned children and old people who had until then been excluded



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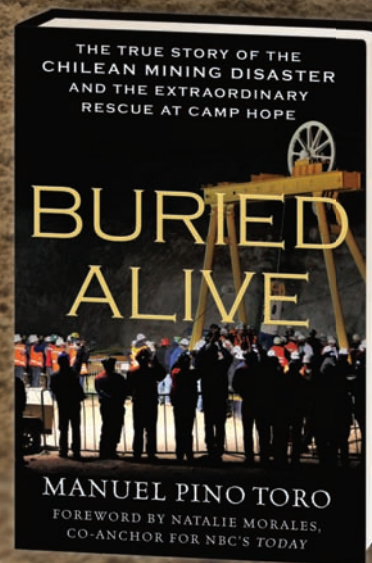


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from the camps, were taken from Vienna at the beginning of June. Leonhard Friedrich, a German Quaker arrested in May for helping Jews, later wrote: "In the six months after the United States entered the war, the Gestapo felt under no restraints."

Even at this stage, word was spreading in the United States. On June 2, 1942, for example, a story ran in many American newspapers about Hitler's plan. It was written by Joseph Grigg, a United Press journalist who had been interned by the Germans for five months, then freed with other Americans as a result of negotiations. "There apparently was an effort to create a 'Jew-free' Reich by April 1, as a birthday gift for Hitler," Grigg reported, "but due to transportation and other difficulties the schedule could not be maintained." The massacres in Russia, Poland, and the Baltic states were, Grigg said, "the most terrible racial persecution in modern history."

Meanwhile, that June, the United States was "fighting Hitler" by doing—what? By battling the Japanese navy, by building big bombers, and by having big war parades. On June 13, with the Allied land assault on Europe still two years away, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York City threw an enormous one. It went on for a full day. There were tanks, planes, and picturesque international costumes, but there were also floats meant to stir emotions of enmity and fear. A float called "Death Rides" moved slowly by: it was a giant animated skeleton beating two red swastika-bearing drums. There was a huge mustachioed figure in a Prussian helmet and body armor, riding a Disney-style dinosaur that strode heedlessly through corpses—the float was called "Hitler, the Axis War Monster." There was a float called "Tokyo: We Are Coming!" in which American airplanes set fire to the city, frightening off a swarm of large yellow rats. The *New York Herald Tribune's* reporter wrote that the only thing missing from the parade was subtlety. This is what the United States was doing during the early phase of the Holocaust: beating big red toy death drums on Fifth Avenue.

During this same midwar period, the Royal Air Force's attacks on Ger-

man civilian life crossed a new threshold of intensity. The militarily insignificant city of Lübeck, on the Baltic Sea, crowded with wood-timbered architectural treasures, was the target of the first truly successful mass firebombing, on the night of March 28, 1942, which burned much of the old city and destroyed a famous, centuries-old painting cycle, *Totentanz* ("The Dance of Death"). "Blast and bomb, attack and attack until there is nothing left," said the *Sunday Express*. "Even if 'Lübecking' does not crack the morale of Germany, it is certainly going to raise our spirits," said the *Daily Mail*. (Vera Brittain, reading through a pile of these clippings, exclaimed: "We are Gadarene swine, inhabited by devils of our own making, rushing down a steep place into the sea.")

Operation Millennium was the RAF's next large-scale fire raid, at the end of May. Nearly 1,000 bombers flowed toward the city of Cologne, where they dropped about 1,600 tons of bombs—more firebombs than high explosives—in half an hour, destroying tens of thousands of houses and apartments and more than twenty churches. The area around the city's main cathedral was a roasted ruin. "You have no idea of the thrill and encouragement which the Royal Air Force bombing has given to all of us here," wrote Roosevelt's personal aide, Harry Hopkins, to Churchill. He added: "I imagine the Germans know all too well what they have to look forward to."

No doubt the Germans did know—in any case, they promptly blamed the Jews for the bombings. In a radio broadcast, Goebbels said that Germans were now fighting for their very skins. Then again came the overt threat: "In this war the Jews are playing their most criminal game and they will have to pay for it with the extermination of their race throughout Europe and, maybe, even beyond."

In the Warsaw ghetto, that same June of 1942, Emanuel Ringelblum read the reports and remembered an old story about a profligate nobleman. Shlomo, the nobleman's moneylender, auctioned the man's land in payment for debts. The nobleman, enraged, bought a dog, named him Shlomo, and beat him daily. The same thing, wrote Ringelblum, was happening to the

Germans: "They are being defeated, their cities are being destroyed, so they take their revenge on the Jews." Ringelblum and his friends, although of several minds about the need for retribution, agreed on one thing: "Only a miracle can save us: a sudden end to the war, otherwise we are lost."

A sudden end to the war, otherwise we are lost. This, then, was the context for Abraham Kaufman's June 16, 1942, talk at the Union Methodist Church. First worry about the saving of lives, his logic went—everything else is secondary. In July, the SS began the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, loading 6,000 people onto freight cars every day. The head of the Jewish Council, Adam Czerniaków, committed suicide rather than comply; the Germans were holding his wife hostage. Knowing what we know now, wouldn't we all have stood and said what Kaufman said?

Confirmation of the Final Solution didn't get out widely in the Western press until November 1942, when Rabbi Stephen Wise, after inexplicable delays, called a press conference to reveal the substance of an urgent telegram he had received from Switzerland in August. The Associated Press reported: "Dr. Stephen S. Wise, chairman of the World Jewish Congress, said tonight that he had learned through sources confirmed by the State Department that about half the estimated 4,000,000 Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe have been slain in an 'extermination campaign.'"

Once Wise broke his silence, there was a surge of press coverage. President Roosevelt promised retribution, and, as Churchill had done not long before, quoted Longfellow: "The mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." Yiddish papers carried black bars of mourning. And in December, Anthony Eden, Churchill's foreign minister, read an Allied condemnation in Parliament. "The German authorities," Eden declared, "not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish

people in Europe.” Like Roosevelt, Eden promised that the culprits would “not escape retribution.”

After Eden was finished, there was a moment of silence: a minute or two of grief for the Jews of Europe. “The whole crowded House—an unprecedented thing to do and not provided for by any Standing Order—rose to its feet and stood in silent homage to those who were about to die,” Sydney Silverman, MP, recollected after the war. “We could not do much to help them. No one desired that our war activity should be moderated in any sort of way or that our war effort should be in any way weakened in order to bring succor to those threatened people.”

The atrocity was so gargantuan, wrote *The Nation* a week later, that it would have to await the perspective of history to be understood. Again came the question—what to do? “Peace with Hitler for the sake of saving hostages is out of the question,” the editors asserted. “Such a surrender would mean disaster for the world, for the Jews above all. Yet the harder we fight, the nearer the doom of the Nazis approaches, the fiercer will grow their homicidal mania. Let it be admitted in all solemnity that there is no escape from this ghastly dilemma.” The only thing to do was fight on.

No, there was a better way, thought Jessie Wallace Hughan, founder of the War Resisters League. Hughan, a soft-faced, wide-smiling woman in her late sixties, was a poet and high school teacher (she had been Abraham Kaufman’s English teacher at Textile High School). She sent a letter to two fellow pacifist leaders, asking them to help her mount a campaign.

It seems that the only way to save thousands and perhaps millions of European Jews from destruction would be for our government to broadcast the promise of a speedy and favorable armistice on condition that the European minorities are not molested any further. I know how improbable it is that our U.S. government would accept this but if it is the only possibility, ought not our pacifist groups to take some action?

Hughan gave talks on the necessity of rescue, she wrote letters to the State Department and the White House, and she and Abraham Kaufman, with the



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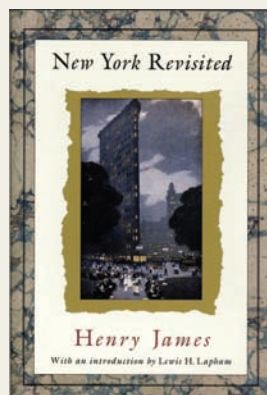
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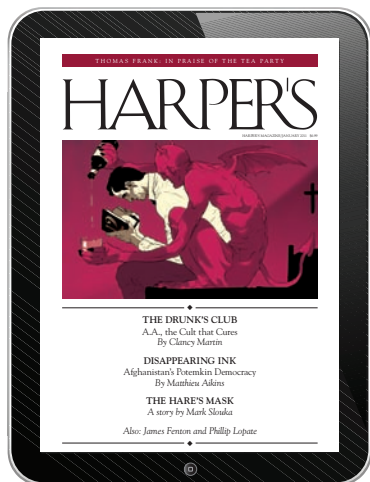
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help of volunteers, distributed thousands of pro-armistice flyers. A peace without delay, conditional upon the release of Jews and other political prisoners, might bring the end of Hitler's reign, she suggested: "There are many anti-Nazis in the Reich, and hope is a stronger revolutionary force than despair." She wrote a blunt letter on the subject to the *New York Times*: "We must act now, because dead men cannot be liberated." The *Times* didn't print it.

Other pacifists publicly took up this cause. "Peace Now Without Victory Will Save Jews," wrote Dorothy Day on the front page of her *Catholic Worker*, and the Jewish Peace Fellowship called for an armistice to prevent Jewish extermination and "make an end to the world-wide slaughter." Britain said that Jewish rescue required "the termination or the interruption of the war, and not its increasingly bitter continuation."

Even lapsed or near pacifists—including Eleanor Rathbone in the House of Commons, and the publisher Victor Gollancz—urgently echoed this sentiment: If we failed to make some kind of direct offer to Hitler for the safe passage of Jews, we shared a responsibility for their fate. Gollancz sold a quarter of a million copies of an extraordinary pamphlet called "Let My People Go," in which he questioned the Churchill government's promise of postwar retribution. "This 'policy,' it must be plainly said, will not save a single Jewish life," he wrote.

Will the death, after the war, of a Latvian or Lithuanian criminal, or of a Nazi youth who for ten years has been specially and deliberately trained to lose his humanity—will the death of these reduce by one jot or tittle the agony of a Jewish child who perhaps at this very moment at which I write, on Christmas day, three hours after the sweet childish carol, "O come, all ye faithful," was broadcast before the seven o'clock news, is going to her death in a sealed coach, her lungs poisoned with the unslaked lime with which the floor is strewn, and with the dead standing upright about her, because there is no room for them to fall?

What mattered, Gollancz held, was, and he put it in italics, *the saving of life now*. The German government had to be approached immediately

and asked to allow Jews to emigrate. The Allies had nothing to lose with such a proposal. "If refused, that would strip Hitler of the excuse that he cannot afford to fill useless mouths," Gollancz wrote. "If accepted, it would not frustrate the economic blockade, because Hitler's alternative is not feeding but extermination."

Nobody in authority in Britain and the United States paid heed to these promptings. Anthony Eden, Britain's foreign secretary, who'd been tasked by Churchill with handling queries about refugees, dealt coldly with one of many importunate delegations, saying that any diplomatic effort to obtain the release of the Jews from Hitler was "fantastically impossible." On a trip to the United States, Eden candidly told Cordell Hull, the secretary of state, that the real difficulty with asking Hitler for the Jews was that "Hitler might well take us up on any such offer, and there simply are not enough ships and means of transportation in the world to handle them." Churchill agreed. "Even were we to obtain permission to withdraw all Jews," he wrote in reply to one pleading letter, "transport alone presents a problem which will be difficult of solution."

Not enough shipping and transport? Two years earlier, the British had evacuated nearly 340,000 men from the beaches of Dunkirk in just nine days. The U.S. Air Force had many thousands of new planes. During even a brief armistice, the Allies could have airlifted and transported refugees in very large numbers out of the German sphere.

In the American press, calls for a negotiated peace were all but inaudible. The only significant publicity that any U.S. peace advocacy group got after 1942 was negative—witheringly negative in one instance, and rightly so. It came in connection with the formation of something called the Peace Now Movement, which set up an office on Manhattan's East 40th Street in July 1943. Abraham Kaufman, while admiring the antiwar writings of the new group's chairman, George Hartmann, remained wary of its methods, and not just because its name appropriated his own group's most stirring

and useful phrase. What disturbed him was that the Peace Now Movement was willing, as the War Resisters League was not, to accept support from pro-fascists and anti-Semites, or even from “the devil himself,” according to Hartmann, in order to bring the war to an end.

Kaufman also had doubts about the past of one of the group’s organizers, John Collett, who’d been institutionalized for a mental disorder, and whose Norwegian visa imparted a fascist taint. In any case, Collett, out on a speaking tour, self-destructed: he was arrested in Cincinnati for peeping into a sorority shower and fined a hundred dollars.

After Collett resigned, another Peace Now staffer, Bessie Simon, carried on her friendly overtures to prominent isolationists and Nazi apologists, including Charles Lindbergh. Simon also hired a pretty blonde secretary, who turned out to be a plant working under an assumed name (“Virginia Long”), and whose stolen haul of damning correspondence soon found its way to the *New York Post*: PEACE NOW ENLISTS BUNDISTS! was one front-page headline in a weeklong exposé. *Life* called the Peace Now Movement “not only dangerous but subversive”; the House Un-American Activities Committee condemned one of the group’s mailings, which encouraged churchmen to ask their congregations to follow Christ and lay down their arms. It was, the Dies Committee determined, “a plan for mass treason which was truly colossal in its conception.”

As Kaufman had foreseen, the scandal of Hartmann’s Peace Now Movement eclipsed much of the work he and his colleagues had done. Now if you were willing to say publicly that the killing should stop, you weren’t just a harmless simpleton but a fascist fellow traveler. According to David Lawrence, a widely syndicated conservative columnist and editor of *U.S. News*, peace talk diminished Allied soldiers’ fighting zeal. “It is a weapon which is worth more to the enemy than any other,” he insisted. “That’s why it is vital to squelch any ‘peace now’ activities at their very inception.”

And yet Kaufman and Hughan and the others carried on. In March 1944, with thousands of Jews still living who

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SOLUTION TO THE APRIL PUZZLE

NOTES FOR
“PLUS FOURS”:

Puzzle editing by
Dan Asimov. Note: *
indicates an anagram.

FOUR-LETTER WORDS:

- a. (p)ants; b. boar, homonym;
- c. cit(rev.)-y; d. C.O.D.-e;
- e. ding(o); f. feat, homonym;
- g. F(ord)-end; h. f(l)at; i. her-b; j. in-K(ansa)s; k. meth*; l. mist, hidden; m. rain, hidden; n. (d)rams;
- o. S.A.S.’s; p. s(pring)-can; q. scar(e); r. sris, rev.; s. tang, two mngs.; t. tier, two mngs.; u. tom-B(rev.); v. to-T.E.; w. tref*; x. yews, homonym

ACROSS: 7. hidden; 8. *; 9. M(illand)-ANTA; 10. *; 11. *; 12. ca-ba(N.A.)nas; 17. d(e-ade)ye; 18. R-ears; 19. a-RR-E(A[nne])R; 22. i(L)eal; 23. v(iz)ier; 24. a(r[M.A.]d)a

DOWN: 1. Or(f)eo; 2. (P.R.)elate; 3. *; 4. S.(tar[rev.])E.S.; 5. sa(tisf*)y; 6. fl(a-BB)y; 13. ar(eola[rev.]); 14. ad-den-da(rev.); 15. wee(k)-in(rev.)-(Clev)e(land); 16. d(ream)s; 20. (runne)r-Azor(es); 21. A.T.(ea)M.

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were not destined to survive, the War Resisters League published an updated demand that the Allies call a peace conference, stipulating Jewish deliverance. "The fortunes of war have turned, and with them the responsibility for war," Hughan wrote. "The guilt is upon our heads until we offer our enemies an honorable alternative to bitter-end slaughter. Are we fighting for mere victory or, as enlightened adults, for humanity and civilization?"

We were fighting, it seems, for mere victory. It was inconceivable that we could stop, even though an end to the fighting was the solvent that would have dissolved quicker than anything the thick glue of fear that held Hitler and Germany together. By 1944, Hitler's health was failing. He was evil, but he wasn't immortal. Whether or not the German opposition, in the sudden stillness of a conditional armistice, would have been able to remove him from power, he would eventually be dead and gone. And some of his millions of victims—if such an armistice had been secured—would have lived.

Peace and quiet was what the world needed so desperately then. Time to think, and mourn. Time to sleep without fear. Time to crawl out of the wreckage of wherever you were and look around, and remember what being human was all about. Instead, what did we do? Bomb, burn, blast, and starve, waiting for the unconditional surrender that didn't come until the Red Army was in Berlin. We came up with a new kind of "sticky flaming goo," as the *New York Times* called what would later be known as napalm. Allied airplanes burned the Rouen cathedral, so that the stones crumbled to pieces when touched, destroyed Monte Cassino, and killed 200 schoolchildren during a single raid in Milan. A conservative MP, Reginald Purbrick, who had wanted the Royal Air Force to drop a big bomb into the crater of Mount Vesuvius ("to make a practical test as to whether the disturbances created thereby will give rise to severe earthquakes and eruptions"), began

asking the prime minister whether the Royal Air Force might bomb Dresden and other cities in eastern Germany. Churchill eventually obliged him. Remorse works well, but it works only in peacetime.

When Vera Brittain argued against the Allied program of urban obliteration in her pamphlet *Massacre by Bombing*, the Writers' War Board, a government-funded American propaganda agency, pulled out all the stops in attacking her. MacKinlay Kantor (who later cowrote Curtis LeMay's memoir, the one that talked about bombing Vietnam "back into the Stone Age") published a letter in the *Times* dismissing Brittain's "anguished ramblings." The Japanese and Germans well understood the "language of bombs," Kantor said. "May we continue to speak it until all necessity for such cruel oratory has passed."

Some historians, still believing that bombing has a magical power to communicate, conclude from this dismal stretch of history that the Allied air forces should have bombed the railroad tracks that led to the death camps, or bombed the camps themselves. But bombing would have done absolutely nothing except kill more Jews (and Jews were already dying when Allied fighter planes routinely strafed boxcars in transit.) A cease-fire—"a pause in the fury of hostilities," as Vera Brittain called it in one of her newsletters—was the one chance the Allies had to save Jewish lives, and the pacifists proposed it repeatedly, using every means available to them.

So the Holocaust continued, and the firebombing continued: two parallel, incommensurable, war-born leviathans of pointless malice that fed each other and could each have been stopped long before they were. The mills of God ground the cities of Europe to powder—very slowly—and then the top Nazis chewed their cyanide pills or were executed at Nuremberg. Sixty million people died all over the world so that Hitler, Himmler, and Goering could commit suicide? How utterly ridiculous and tragic.

Pacifism at its best, said Arthur Ponsonby, is "intensely practical." Its primary object is the saving of life.

To that overriding end, pacifists opposed the counterproductive barbarity of the Allied bombing campaign, and they offered positive proposals to save the Jews: create safe havens, call an armistice, negotiate a peace that would guarantee the passage of refugees. We should have tried. If the armistice plan failed, then it failed. We could always have resumed the battle. Not trying leaves us culpable.

At a Jewish Peace Fellowship meeting in Cincinnati some years after the war, Rabbi Cronbach was asked how any pacifist could justify opposition to World War II. "War was the sustenance of Hitler," Cronbach answered. "When the Allies began killing Germans, Hitler threatened that, for every German slain, ten Jews would be slain, and that threat was carried out. We in America are not without some responsibility for that Jewish catastrophe."

If we don't take seriously pacifists like Cronbach, Hughan, Kaufman, Day, and Brittain—these people who thought as earnestly about wars and their consequences as did politicians or generals or think-tankers—we'll be forever suspended in a kind of immobilizing sticky goo of euphemism and self-deception. We'll talk about intervention and preemption and no-fly zones, and we'll steer drones around distant countries on murder sorties. We'll arm the world with weaponry, and every so often we'll feel justified in taxiing out a few of our stealth airplanes from their air-conditioned hangars and dropping some expensive bombs. Iran? Pakistan? North Korea? What if we "crater the airports," as Senator Kerry suggested, to slow down Qaddafi? As I write, the United States has begun a new war against Libya, dropping more things on people's heads in the name of humanitarian intervention.

When are we going to grasp the essential truth? War never works. It never has worked. It makes everything worse. Wars must be, as Jessie Hughan wrote in 1944, renounced, rejected, declared against, over and over, "as an ineffective and inhuman means to any end, however just." That, I would suggest, is the lesson that the pacifists of the Second World War have to teach us. ■