

Introduction

Attacking the People: Democracy, Populism, and Modern War

Before the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) carried out a campaign of bombings across England following a January 1939 demand for the total withdrawal of British forces from Ireland. Despite IRA claims to only target city infrastructure, a devastating attack rocked the Coventry city centre on 24 August while war with Germany was looming in continental Europe. In a personal diary, Coventry resident Mary Bloomfield called the IRA bombing ‘a terrible crime’, and added that ‘the horror of it completely took people’s minds off the coming war’.¹ The British people, but especially the citizens of Coventry, were obsessed with the IRA terrorist acts; newspaper clippings pepper diaries from 1939 as they followed the case. Ordinary urban citizens were horrified by the idea that an armed force could slaughter non-combatants like themselves to further its political and military goals. Newspapers decried terrorism’s inhumanity, and broadsheets in Coventry carried the names of victims as they came to light.

It is incredible to think of the attention British society paid to the dead in Coventry before the Second World War, and the shock displayed at the treatment of ordinary people as targets. By the end of the war, the devastation meted out to Coventry’s people was so terrible that Joseph Goebbels described the mass destruction of any British city as being ‘Coventried’ (*coventriert*). British citizens, in turn, supported reprisals in the form of targeting civilians in Germany, just as the Americans ruthlessly firebombed Japan.² The transition from moral outrage over civilian deaths to it being the ‘new normal’ took place more rapidly, and easily, than we would like to admit. In many cases, even the victims of aerial bombardment accepted the targeting of non-combatants, which would have included their relatives and neighbours, as a normal wartime practice. In his comparative study of bombing in Britain and Germany, Dietmar Süß analysed some remarkable correspondence between Germans in the heavily bombed city of Hamburg. One letter writer speculated that the Allied destruction of his home town was ‘retaliation

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for our treatment of the Jews', and that other 'bombed out' citizens were similarly worried that 'if we hadn't treated the Jews so badly we wouldn't have had to suffer so much from the terror attacks'.³ Most people in wartime Europe and Asia, despite the proliferation of racial theory, accepted the fact that their enemies were human beings like themselves; thus, attacking the enemy's non-combatants necessarily meant that ordinary people at home would be attacked in retaliation – and this cycle could repeat itself over and over again. Following the firebombing of Takamatsu, Iriye Hisae reflected on how she was no longer able to feel the horror of war, which was, in itself, a new form of war horror:

The stench of burning corpses poured through the streets, but I was not afraid, and I unexpectedly became accustomed to the smell. These days [in the post-war] a person's death is terrible and disgusting no matter what, but back then I think people's hearts were numbed. In war, you're mentally abnormal. It's terrible to think that you can get used to evil.⁴

Hisae's statement shows us that Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' was hardly unique to Nazi Germany – in fact, it was a transnational wartime condition. As Hew Strachan argued, the nature of 'total war' was not simply mass mobilisation, but the transformation of civilians into legitimate targets.⁵ Nevertheless, the experience of being bombed did not necessarily create a hatred of war, but a desire for more, and more inhumane, forms of it, which arguably culminated in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombing war thus made ordinary people willing perpetrators of ever-escalating brutality against other civilians, meaning, as Susan Neiman put it, for us today 'the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp'; in other words, by studying the accounts of civilians in the Second World War, we should be able to understand how such a destructive war was made possible by people very much like ourselves.⁶

The war was hardest on non-elites who lived in the city – the builders, doctors, machinists, housewives, students, and policemen – who simultaneously made peacetime urban life possible (even desirable) and supported the machinery necessary for waging total war. Take, for example, the case of Ōmura Seitarō, who was a 37-year-old owner of a cloth-dyeing workshop in Hakata, a city in the northernmost edge of Japan's large southern island, Kyūshū. Because Kyūshū was a significant launch pad for invasion forces heading to East Asia and the Pacific, and Hakata was a major port linking Kyūshū to the main island of Honshū, the city was bombed heavily by the Allies. When the attack began, Seitarō hurried his wife and children into a nearby bomb shelter, following exercises organised by local authorities. Despite his neighbours' calls for help to fight

fires, he wrote ‘I couldn’t let my workshop burn down’, so he expended his energies there, albeit ultimately in vain; his business was lost. Meanwhile, his home was also swimming ‘in a sea of fire’. Seeing the neighbourhood abandoned and the situation increasingly dire, he tossed away his fire-fighting bucket, fetched his family, and ran to a road that led into the countryside. ‘Looking back at Hakata’, he recalled, ‘it was entirely engulfed in flames. Until then I was going on instinct alone, but I finally had a sense of relief having escaped’. He came upon a rural household, and from the road he could see nets that would keep swarms of summertime mosquitoes away from his children. ‘We are refugees’, he pleaded with the owners, ‘let us rest here’. The owners graciously allowed his wife and children to sleep in peace, and he spoke of the raids while the evening was brightened by the fires consuming his hometown. After his rustic hosts fed the desperate city folk, Seitarō thanked them profusely, and then returned to the family home. It had burned to the ground. ‘I wonder if the evacuation supplies that we had left behind are gone’, he thought, but soon discovered that ‘even the plants in the garden were burnt to cinders’. Then, a mysterious sensation took hold of him:

Strangely enough, just because the house and our evacuation supplies were gone didn’t mean that I felt, in any way, it was a great loss or a terribly sad event. What I felt at that moment, I can still vividly remember now: it was like I was cleansed. I hadn’t been conscripted, but at the very least I had given everything for the nation, so it felt like I was able to comfort myself by this sense of having shouldered my responsibilities.

Citizens of Britain and Japan felt that giving everything was their duty which, given how casually the state threw away their lives and livelihood, was a mysterious phenomenon indeed. After describing his ‘cleansing’, Seitarō laconically noted that his sacrifices were still not enough: ‘That August, I was drafted into the Imperial Japanese Navy’.⁷ Still, while it was easier to see a foreign government, and not one’s own, as responsible for personal losses, supporting bombing and then being bombed were linked in the minds of many in Britain and Japan; before the ‘blitzes’ began on British cities, in late 1939, Liverpoolian Dorothy Hughes watched with some dismay as war fever gripped the country, writing that ‘people in England do not realise what we are up against. They think that what has happened in Poland could never happen here, but I sometimes wonder’.⁸ Before the war, some citizens realised that supporting the bombing war meant that it could be returned to them and their loved ones in kind. During the war, many no longer cared as long as their side achieved victory.

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The terror suffered at home was simultaneously being meted out abroad by one's own, or allied, forces; the context in which the modern world came to embrace area bombing is almost unknown to citizens in Japan and Britain today, where it is considered dishonourable and immoral to attack non-combatants. For example, in critiques of political organisations such as Hezbollah, better-organised, formal armies such as the Israeli Defence Forces point out the 'cowardice' that their enemies display by hiding in civilian areas and using them as a 'human shield'. Further cowardice is revealed, and particularly enraging to observers in the West, when Hezbollah forces fire rockets into Israeli civilian areas, conducting campaigns of terror.⁹ Hezbollah retorts that it is the IDF that is 'cowardly', as it wields all of the power of the state against defenceless Muslims. Reading such accusations in the Western mass media, it is easy for us to think that we were never capable of such brutality. Westerners lambast the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS or simply IS) as 'barbaric', 'medieval', and 'uncivilised', but it was only in the last century that Allied bombers irrevocably erased historic urban areas in Germany and Japan, including the use of an atomic weapon against Nagasaki, one of the most historically significant cities in the archipelago (including being the centre of Japanese Christianity from the sixteenth century). It was not so long ago, then, that we bombed non-combatants, launched terror campaigns, and destroyed irreplaceable historical sites in what we fervently believed to be a righteous conflict. Then again, the Allies did not start the war, so what else could we do?

The difficulty we have in confronting the inhumanity of our wartime past is exacerbated by the enduring power of remembrance narratives, particularly in former Allied countries. As we have seen in the recent conflicts over historical memory of the Second World War between China and Japan, embracing Manichean 'victim narratives' about the past is very tempting, and more appropriate for contemporary political struggles than understanding the war. Joshua Fogel pointed out that, as how the memory of the Shoah helped the Jewish diaspora find a common identity in the chaos of the post-war era, so too did righteous anger over the Nanjing Massacre promise to elide irreconcilable divisions between Chinese in America, Taiwan, Singapore, and the People's Republic.¹⁰ In the United States and Britain, being part of a heroic anti-fascist force obfuscates our own history of racism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and acts of mass violence. Consequently, self-serving heroic or victim narratives will always be unsatisfactory for anyone acquainted with the complexities of the wartime past. The Second World War, as a 'total war', put the ordinary person in the uncomfortable position of being an enforced

contributor to mobilisation and thereby a 'legitimate target' of enemy aggression, but it did not make civilians more sympathetic toward non-combatants elsewhere. As George Orwell put it in 1943:

... what impressed me [during the Spanish Civil War], and has impressed me ever since, is that atrocities are believed in or disbelieved in solely on grounds of political predilection. Everyone believes in the atrocities of the enemy and disbelieves in those of his own side, without ever bothering to examine the evidence.¹¹

Consequently, British citizens chiefly remember the war as one in which they were subjected to enemy bombing campaigns, particularly in the cities; their former 'enemies', however, the Japanese, have come to articulate exactly the same collective memory of the Second World War. Is it possible for both Allied and Axis to be victims of aggression? After the figurative firestorm over David Irving's critique of Allied bombing as a war crime, a close critical examination by historians of the decision to area bomb city centres quickly followed. Frederick Taylor's illumination of Dresden as an actual military target mirrors the problematic way we look at cities such as Hiroshima, which was a major launching point for the invasion of Asia by Japanese forces, but was portrayed as an unwitting, passive recipient of Allied aggression in the film *Black Rain* (Kuroi Ame). During the Second World War, even so-called precision bombing of military targets was problematic: the forced mobilisation of teenagers into Japanese war factories meant that legitimate objects of aerial bombardment would include schoolgirls. In any case, as historians like Yoshimi Yoshiaki showed, the Japanese people were as supportive of the war effort as the British and Germans were, which makes facile victim/perpetrator narratives difficult to defend under sustained scrutiny.¹²

Within the grim cheering of citizens supporting the annihilation of the enemy, there were voices of concern and even dissent, but these remained, unfortunately, comparatively quiet. By 1941, official opposition to the war effort in Japan had been quashed following debates about the 1937 war in China. Military officers like Ishiwara Kanji and Matsuno Hironori, who opposed the escalating conflicts, were either exiled or sidelined in official discussions; in Britain, veterans and officers like Tom Wintringham and Philip S. Mumford did not shift the discourse away from support for total war in Britain. In Liverpool on 3 March 1941, Dorothy Hughes saw a piece of silk parachute, spattered with blood, inscribed with the following bit of anti-German bigotry: 'Another squarehead gone West'. Upon reflection, Dorothy wrote in her diary that she was convinced:

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... the only way to stop this business was to cut out all nationalism. All speak one language, and have equal rights. No top dog. No doubt we have been guilty of this all along. Certain American opinion still thinks it serves us right.¹³

In due time, the United States would also enter the war and, as John Dower showed, its government deployed even worse examples of bigotry and racism against their Japanese enemies.¹⁴ Dorothy had grasped an important aspect of the Second World War, however: the dehumanisation of the enemy abetted area bombing campaigns, and justified popular support for the mechanisms of total war. The people's embrace of war in Britain and Japan enabled the massacre of innocent people in enemy nations, but also legitimised the attacks on their loved ones back home. In our rush to support the war, we were killing ourselves. Contrary to wartime propaganda and patriotic post-war memory, this outcome was neither 'normal' nor inevitable in the long view of modern history.

Mirror, Mirror: The Heyday of British and Japanese Imperialism

Throughout the Second World War, Japanese and British propagandists insisted that East and West were irreconcilably different, but both entered into the era of total war from a shared history of capitalist growth, imperialist expansion, and international cooperation. The new world order that the Second World War created was one that no one could have imagined even a decade prior; after the war, the British and the Japanese empires would totally collapse, and both would share a 'special relationship' with the United States. After the war, Britain and Japan's convergence as peripheral economies, but crucial allies, vis-à-vis American power may seem to be a curious postscript to the Second World War, but in many respects it greatly resembled the mutual admiration the empires expressed for each other prior to the 1930s.

The transformation of Britain and Japan during the Second World War was so total that it left older citizens in a state of shock and disorientation. On the eve of the air war, and his 66th birthday, in September 1940, H. B. Monck reflected on how thorough home front mobilisation had deeply shaken countries like Britain and Japan, which had enjoyed decades of mostly uncritical populist support for imperial violence:

I cannot help thinking what a different world it is to when I was a boy. You could read as I did all about our wars in Egypt and Abyssinia and take a mild interest in them. Our totalitarianism had not yet been invented and yet it seems to be only just that everyone should be involved in such a serious thing as war. You can only

be astonished in actual fact what little control individuals have over events which are going to have a vital effect on their lives.¹⁵

Monck sensed that the city and its people had entered a significantly new historical epoch, and not necessarily a better one. For too long, Britain and Japan had successfully exported mass murder to their empires with little political consequence at home; in the new world, however, bombing wars brought this violence back to the home islands, and in the process remade cities across Britain and Japan (with help from zealous post-war city planners as well). Yokouchi Tomi, who was a factory foreman during the heavy Allied bombing of Kōfu, began his post-war memoir by remarking on how much his home town had changed:

I'm heading out from the south gate of the Kōfu Station, down Peace Street . . . and there is a forest of tall buildings and structures that are impervious to fire. For one such as I, who was born in the Meiji Era [1868–1912] and knew Kōfu before the war, this is a sight that makes me feel like I'm from another world.¹⁶

Indeed, by the time Tomi was writing in the early 1970s, Japan had transformed from a wartime disaster zone to the second largest economy in the world, while Britain's trajectory seemed irrevocably fixed downward. This post-war reversal of fortunes, from the perspective of the Meiji and Victorian generations, as well as the previous wartime division of Japan and Britain into Axis and Allied powers, was a bizarre historical rupture. For Monck and Yokouchi, the mutually beneficial 'civilised' world of the fin-de-siècle British and Japanese empires had disappeared in a cataclysm of parachute mines and incendiary bombs.

To those who grew up watching 'enlightened' lords and industrial leaders guide their empires to fame and profit, Japan and Britain's collision course was not a foregone conclusion. Both prided themselves on professional armed forces, 'civilisation and enlightenment', monarchy, and a dedication to parliamentary government. By the end of the nineteenth century, 'British financial backing for Japan's imperial ambitions . . . became a central feature of the dawning era of East Asian international relations'.¹⁷ From the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance to the early 1930s, the two countries frequently collaborated in the imperial 'great game', successfully containing Russia, opposing the Communist International, exacting concessions from the Qing Dynasty and Chinese Republic, concluding successful naval arms limitation treaties, and even being allies in the First World War.¹⁸

Relations were sometimes strained, such as during the failure of the Racial Equality Proposal at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and the Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922); moreover,

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post-First-World-War Japanese growth could threaten and rankle British merchants and Commonwealth citizens. While the early period of Japanese expansion was not driven by excess capital and production,¹⁹ from the First World War a second industrial revolution in Japan made their companies equal and direct competitors with Britain's for markets throughout Africa and Asia. Still the Japanese did not see their actions as a direct challenge to the old world order that Britain helped create: Japanese imperialists explicitly compared their annexation of Korea in 1910 to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, and many British expatriates in Shanghai actually expressed a desire for Japanese seizure of the city because, they believed, it would bring order. Throughout this period the Japanese Imperial Navy and the Bank of Japan worked amicably with, and were inspired by, their British counterparts: British citizens celebrated Japanese 'efficiency' and the elegance of their arts; Japanese scientists and engineers worked closely with their British colleagues in a fairly free and collegial international environment.²⁰ Alfred Stead and H. G. Wells imagined the present and future importance of Japan for the twentieth century world, sometimes explicitly comparing it to Britain. This positive view of Japanese modernity was not limited to Britain: rediscovered original cuts of *Metropolis* reveal that Thea von Harbou launched the futuristic narrative not in Germany, but Tokyo's Yoshiwara district. While early English views of Japanese visitors to the United Kingdom, in the 1860s, were a mixture of condescending bemusement and appreciation for their earnestness in learning modern engineering,²¹ by the 1930s, both British and Japanese aviation experts were working furiously to best each other on equal footing.

Indeed, after the 1929 market crash Britain was mired in the Great Depression and Japanese leaders launched a 'quest for autonomy', which involved describing Japan's former ally as an eternal enemy.²² The Japanese economy boomed after Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo took Japan off of the gold standard and launched aggressive fiscal and monetary policies, which seriously threatened the British position in important Asian markets. Meanwhile, the Japanese civilian bureaucrats, elected officials, and business leaders with whom the British collaborated were intimidated or murdered in a system that wartime commentators described as 'government by assassination'.²³ The Japanese invasion of northeastern China (Manchuria) proved a breaking point. In 1931, the Earl of Lytton headed an exploratory committee to investigate the Japanese seizure of Manchuria, and by October 1932 they determined the new state, Manchukuo to be a puppet regime under the control of the Japanese Army; this directly led to Japan's departure from the League of Nations in 1933. Furthermore, the old guard who had led Japan at the

end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, understanding Japan's limitations and the necessity of international cooperation, was quickly passing away.

The new breed of Japanese bureaucrats were not advocates of Western-style 'civilisation and enlightenment', but staunchly opposed to 'Anglo-American encirclement' and in favour of regional autarky. Throughout the 1930s, the Japanese military expanded rapidly in mainland Asia, until conflicts between Chinese Nationalist and Japanese regional forces transformed into a devastating eight-year total war in 1937.²⁴ This war was conducted in the back garden of historic British interests based in cities like Shanghai. The rapid expansion of Japanese power in the 1930s put the country on a collision course with the British Empire (and their American ally) in Asia, and the United States retaliated by organising lend-lease programs aiding China and oil and steel embargoes to Japan. Japanese authorities, and many members of the public, viewed American and British soldiers stationed in East and Southeast Asia as defenders of Western imperialism – which, it must be said, they were. Consequently, the attack on Pearl Harbor was followed immediately by the ouster of American forces in their 1898 colony, the Philippine Commonwealth. By 1942, Japanese armed forces inflicted upon Great Britain its worst military defeat in modern history during the fall of Singapore. Japanese leaders and ideologues justified these wars of aggression by describing them as wars of defence, and pointed to the inexcusable history of imperial violence and exploitation inflicted on Asia and the Pacific by global superpowers like Great Britain and the United States. The division between Britain and Japan, thus, predated Pearl Harbor, but was still something rather new.

Despite the growing conflict, wartime urban life in Britain and Japan revealed some important similarities, including the role of finance, industrial production, modern culture, and the endurance of imperialism. Unlike America's division of New York and Washington, DC, or China's split between Beijing (or wartime Nanjing) and Shanghai, London and Tokyo combined the financial and political power of two capitalist empires in one centralised space. These metropolises were also the show-cases of imperial wealth and conquest, which created an understandable hostility toward these over-privileged and excessively powerful urban spaces. Dorothy Hughes noted that, in Liverpool, early responses to rationing and evacuation orders from London were sceptical: 'Don't believe it's necessary', one man in his sixties was heard to say in a shop, 'It's only to find work for some of these people up in London'.²⁵ Regional hostility was exacerbated by the capital cities' insistence on their privilege as cultural, economic, and political leaders, even if they

were not representative of broader trends. As Louise Young put it, ‘Japanese modernity was not simply made in Tokyo and exported to the provinces’; instead, we should see cities such as Tokyo and London as the ‘outliers and exceptions’ of modern life, and the regional cities as ‘standard-bearers’.²⁶ Modern Japan and Britain were not defined by Tokyo and London: they had historically important ‘second cities’, such as Manchester and Osaka; powerful and influential urban areas such as Birmingham, Nagoya, Liverpool, and Kobe; and cultural centres such as Kyoto and Oxford. The modern era also saw the emergence of major cities whose growth was driven by new industries, such as Kawasaki, Hull, Okayama, and Sheffield; as a direct consequence of industrialisation, Manchester’s population quadrupled from 1801 to 1851, which was one of the fastest rates of urbanisation in world history – even when excluding the explosive growth of nearby cities like Oldham and Rochdale.²⁷ Similarly, Osaka’s population trebled from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s, excluding the rapid growth of the Kansai region as a whole. Both Osaka and Manchester, to take just two examples, required inputs from abroad, including the empire, to feed the factories and workers that drove British and Japanese industrialisation. These regional cities boasted not only world-class architecture, but also the many signs of modern civilisation, including museums, public parks, cinemas, electric lighting, mass transit, dance halls, and reinforced concrete towers. As Virginia Woolf ended her story of traditional England in *Orlando* (1928) with the confusion of the London’s department stores, so Kawabata Yasunari began his story of modern Japan in *Asakusa kurenaidan* (The Red Gang of Asakusa, 1930) with the perplexing pastiche of Tokyo’s urban environment. The modern city in Britain and Japan was a tangled web of deeply interdependent systems, including rail lines, traffic lanes, pavements, shops, sewers and water supply ducts, telephone and telegraph lines, radio towers, airstrips, hospitals, gas pipes, schools, postal services, and food depots – and this urban machine was deeply imbricated with the global system of imperialism. Bombers targeted these cities as a matter of necessity, as they were correctly seen as the war machine’s workshops.

Citizens sometimes recognised the peril of how closely modernity, war, industrialisation, and imperialism were linked. In Liverpool, H. B. Monck often reflected in his war diary on how modernisation, which created the major cities of Britain and Japan, made life worse: ‘We pay a big price for our industrialisation’, he wrote, ‘It may mean a big empire but whether it makes for real happiness and contentment I am doubtful. I never heard of a Norwegian or Finlander crying in a corner because he was the citizen of a small country’. Unfortunately, the Second World