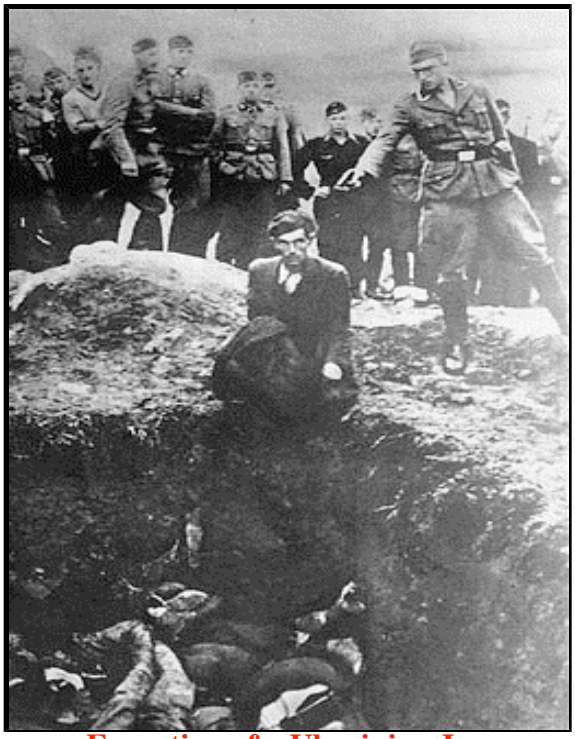
Trapped in a legacy from the past:

"IS THIS ANOTHER NAZI KIND OF THING?"

DOES PEACE REQUIRE HUMAN RIGHTS?

By Frederic A. Moritz



Execution of a Ukrainian Jew

"There are times when words seem empty and only actions seem great. Such a time has come, and in the Providence of God America will once more have an opportunity to show the world that she was born to save mankind."

Woodrow Wilson
Memorial Day address
May 30, 1917

"We're dealing with Hitler revisited."

-- President George Bush on
Saddam Hussein, Oct. 15, 1990.

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THE HITLERIAN ARCHETYPE:

"Is this another Nazi kind of thing?"

Whenever there are reports of massive human rights abuse - be it rape, torture, massacre, or concentration camps - that question is sometimes a central point of reference.

Any human rights violations which resemble those by Hitler and Stalin may well be the "worst case scenario." But if similarities are either apparent or real, editors, reporters, and readers may find them of greater "news value." Politicians can cite the Nazi image to win media coverage, to win popular support.

Thus two Bush presidents have raised the Nazi comparison, cited murders, death camps, and mass rapes to rally support for wars against Saddam Hussein in the name of human rights: first in the Gulf War of 1991 and then in the military overthrow of Saddam in 2003.

Memories of the holocaust are deeply embedded in the emotional landscape around which modern human rights reporting takes place.

Memories of Hitler's extermination camps for the premeditated mass killings of Jews and others provide a

mental "archetype," a melange of images from movies and photos around which we can evaluate current reportage of human rights abuse.

Stalin's mass deportations, executions, and starvation of millions provide a similar, though lower profile, example of massive, calculated, organized, and deliberate destruction of whole classes of people deemed "enemies of history."

The "archetype" is so deeply embedded in the minds of many, that the "never again" impulse deeply etched in World War II survivors and their offspring can sometimes be activated by television footage of burning villages, as during the Vietnam War, or by accounts of concentration camps, as in the case of civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

News stories evoking similarities to the World War II holocaust experience are more likely to evoke public interest, political debate - and hence draw a continuing or even expanded focus as newsworthy. World War II and the events of the Thirties left a wide belief that journalists must temper their natural skepticism with the knowledge that massive, intentional evil is possible even in modern times.

One example was the explosion of American and European press coverage of atrocities in the Yugoslav civil war after August 1992. Coverage of these atrocities had gradually expanded in summer 1992. But the fire storm of Western coverage came only after news reporting began to explicitly evoke the Nazi experience. It is no accident that repeated press coverage of violence in Serb camps erupted into a fire storm after Newsday's European Correspondent Roy Gutman began an August 2, 1992 story this way:

> **"The Serb conquerors of northern Bosnia have established two concentration camps in which more than a thousand civilians have been executed or starved and thousands more are held until they die, according to two recently released prisoners interviewed by Newsday.**
>
> **"The testimony of the two survivors appeared to be the first eyewitness accounts of what international human rights agencies fear may be systematic slaughter conducted on a huge scale."**

Once Newsday had triggered the Nazi "archetype," editors around the country responded by focusing their coverage on the question, "Is this a Nazi kind of thing?"

Piercing photos and television images of wounded children, raped women, and emaciated camp inmates increasingly evoked the "archetype" of Nazi genocide, as commentators

and politicians picked up the theme as a foundation of the debate over what the U.S. should do in former Yugoslavia.

This is not to say that reporters and editors deliberately slant the news or deliberately hunt the world openly asking, "Where can I find a Nazi kind of thing?" Indeed the great bulk of human rights issues are far less dramatic than mass murder. That is one reason they get limited coverage. But once the public debate over an emerging news story becomes framed in images reminiscent of World War II, editors, reporters, and news consumers are more likely to find a distant story "newsworthy" and deserving of time and money.

Correspondent Gutman went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, the Heyward Broun Award, the Polk Award, the National Headliner Award, the Overseas Press Club Award and the Selden Ring Award in Investigative Reporting for his reporting from Yugoslavia. The coverage he generated led to the freeing of at least 6,000 camp inmates, according to Sylvana Foa, formerly a spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Gutman could be particularly sensitive to the Nazi "archetype." In an article in the June, 1993 American Journalism Review he is quoted by Indiana University journalism professor Sherry Ricchiardi as explaining:

> **"Well, I'm Jewish, and yes, the Holocaust is something I believe must never happen again. Somewhere, back in my first thoughts about going into journalism, I considered that maybe if reporters had been out there to issue warnings at the time, they could have stopped it....But I never expected I would be the warning system for some other group.."**

Roy Gutman

The situation in the former Yugoslavia is extreme. But the deeply embedded awareness of the holocaust - the Nazi "archetype "- is just one reason why both television and newspapers have become more sensitive to coverage of international human rights issues.

(Roy Gutman continued his coverage of related human rights issues in his co-authorship of an August 2002 Newsweek investigation of possible massacre of Taliban pow's by suffocation ("death by container") during the Afghan war of 2001. The Newsweek report coincided with a complaint by the American group, Physicians for Human Rights, that the US government had ignored the possibility the prisoners were deliberately killed by one of its "proxy" allies, a warlord of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.)

"NEVER AGAIN": DOES PEACE REQUIRE HUMAN RIGHTS?

The World War II experience flowing out of the rise to power of the Nazis in the 1930's also reinforced a characteristically American perception which has become one intellectual foundation of media reporting on international human rights.

This is what the political scientist Kenneth Waltz (Man, the State, and War, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001) has called the "Second Image" theory of international peace: that development of ruthless tyrannies leads to war since regimes which violate their own people's human rights are more likely to be aggressive internationally.

Woodrow Wilson made "Second Image" thinking the centerpiece of his doctrine that war could be eliminated once the world was "made safe for democracy." ("First Image" has human nature leading to war. "Third Image" holds the cause is international rivalry.)

President George W. Bush has reemphasized "Second Image" thinking by declaring that the threat of global terrorism requires the spread throughout the world of universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Not surprisingly Americans emerged from World War II with a shared conviction that

preservation of human rights and democratic governments would temper the aggressiveness leading nation states into war.

This view found expression in an international consensus leading both to the collective security provisions of the United Nations and a variety of UN related human rights conventions negotiated and signed right after the war.

Thus events which appeared to violate these norms - or were so portrayed by news sources - might strike a receptive popular chord and receive more time, energy, and coverage.

Post World War II "never again" sentiment thus linked the preservation of peace with the preservation of human rights, and the prevention of anything resembling the Nazi holocaust.

The coming of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union kept alive Waltz second image concept, as American politicians and government officials proclaimed that strengthening the "free world" and promoting democracy abroad was necessary to preserve world peace.

American media picked up and reflected government propaganda focusing on the repressive totalitarian features of Stalin's rule in both the Soviet Union and the "captive nations" of Eastern Europe. In the aftermath of 9/11 President George W. Bush has resounded

"NEVER AGAIN": HUMAN RIGHTS GOES "ON TEAM"

Media spotlight on human rights violations in communist countries was "on-team" in that it tended to support the American government's anti-communist cold war policy of "containing" the Soviet Union. In the postwar world the communist bloc replaced the fascist world as both a threat to peace and an abuser of human rights.

American media was covering the efforts of the "Free World" to prevent the triumph of 1930's style totalitarianism - to protect the forces of freedom and light from the forces of repression and darkness.

This "never again" mood took for granted the

repressive evils of totalitarianism and the self-evident wave of darkness that had swept both Germany and the Soviet Union. It was the view of hindsight judging Germany with the graphic photos of Nazi death camps and judging the Soviet Union by the assassinations, coups and open repression enforced in Eastern Europe by the Soviet army.

THE 1930'S: THE ARCHETYPE WAS DIFFERENT THEN

Looking back to the 1930's there was no such widely recognized precedent of modern day capacity for evil. True there was the unparalleled ferocity of World War I, but for the most part large numbers of civilians were not targeted for destruction.

The brutal forced marches and executions inflicted from 1917 to by Turkish forces on Armenians were the closest thing to a modern precedent for the policies of Hitler and Stalin. But these abuses failed to fully penetrate the Western consciousness, and were relatively easily forgotten - save by Armenians survivors in exile around the world.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS: BOER WAR

Western correspondents based in Germany did report the establishment of concentration camps during the Nazi regime's earlier days, beginning with Dachau in 1933.

Reports of concentration camps today leave us almost immediately wondering, "Are they killing people there?" But a half century ago American reporters, editors, and the public had no "archetype" in mind to help them conceive that concentration camps might be way stations toward a systematic program of mass extermination.

After all there were plenty of precedents for sometimes brutally rounding up "enemy" civilians into camps as the British did to the Boers in South Africa at the turn of the century and the Spanish did to Cubans in the 1890's.

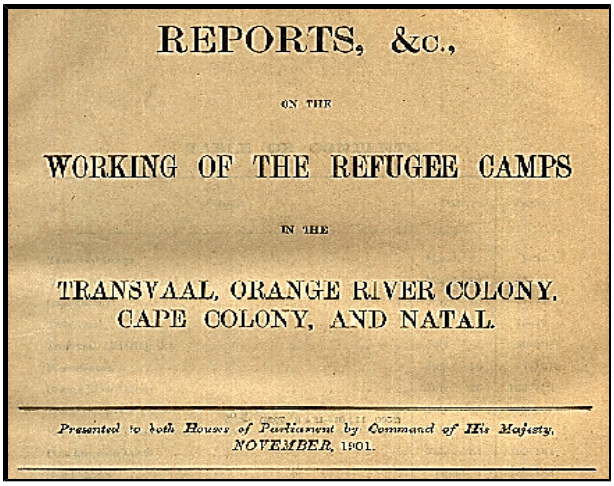
In those cases many inmates suffered terribly and died, but there was no premeditated plan of mass extermination. (Check British documents

at Stanford University libraries as well as photos of concentration camps at the Anglo Boer War Museum.)

Thomas Pakenham highlighted the general brutality of the period in The Boer War, Random House, N.Y., 1979. It took over eight years of research, several months of traveling in South Africa and a frantic quest to find interviewable survivors of this tragic time.

In his introduction Pakenham wrote:

> **"To deny the guerrillas food and intelligence, Lord Kitchener ordered the British army to sweep the veld clean. The farms were burnt, the stock looted, the women and children concentrated in camps along the railroad lines. Between twenty thousand and twenty-eight thousand Boer civilians died of epidemics in these 'concentration camps'...The conscience of Britain was stirred by the 'holocaust' in the camps, just as the conscience of America was stirred by the 'holocaust' of Vietnam."**


REPORTS, &c.,

ON THE

WORKING OF THE REFUGEE CAMPS

IN THE

TRANSVAAL, ORANGE RIVER COLONY, CAPE COLONY, AND NATAL.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty,
NOVEMBER, 1901.

(Click here for or a more extended treatment of human rights issues in the Boer War, including the classic tale of Australian poet/soldier Breaker Morant, executed for war crimes)

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Joseph C. Harsch, who covered Germany for The Christian

Science Monitor from Hitler's September 1939 invasion of Poland to Japan's December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, explains how differently from today "concentration camps" were viewed by some correspondents in 1941:

> **"The word concentration camp has a dreadful connotation now, but it didn't then. Remember the British put the Afrikaners into concentration camps in the Boer War. Putting your enemy aliens into concentration camps was not an unheard or novel or necessarily horrid thing. The British interned enemy aliens into what might be called concentration camps. German Jews were arrested in England and put into concentration camps.**
>
> **"Everybody did it... So there was nothing unusual about the fact that German Jews were rounded up and put into concentration camps. I heard a good deal about them, but it never occurred to anyone that these people would be killed."**
>
> ***(Personal interview Joseph C. Harsch, August 9, 1993).***

"IS THIS ANOTHER KIND OF PROPAGANDA THING?"

It should be noted that sixty years ago governments, editors, reporters, and readers were even more skeptical of international tales of horror. In the 1930's there was wide remembrance of gullible press reporting of German atrocities against nuns and children in World War I. Postwar investigations showed most of these never happened, but were planted in a cooperative media by Allied governments as propaganda against Germany.

As reports of Nazi violence against Jews and others escalated in the early days of World War II, editors, reporters, and readers in the 1930's could ask, "Is this another propaganda kind of thing?" (These topics and others are examined in the classic work on the issue: Deborah E. Lipstadt, Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945, The Free Press, New York, 1986, see pp. 8-9)

In response editors and reporters stepped up their emphasis on skepticism, balance, and on the need for verification of atrocity reports by multiple credible sources. This did made it harder for governments to manipulate some papers. However, it also made it harder for accounts of real, though difficult to verify atrocities, from making their way into the press.

When media did in limited fashion portray what we would today call victims of human rights abuse, they seemed distant bland abstractions with little color or personality. They were "Jews" or "Rumanians" or "peasants" or seemingly anything rather than real people brought alive on camera or by a skillful feature writer's brush. Occasionally a "celebrity as victim" might spring alive as photographers spotlighted an Einstein or a Freud escaping Germany or Austria as refugees from the Nazis.

1930'S RIGHTS COVERAGE: LESSON IN FAILURE?

The events of the 1930's look vastly different today than they would have at the time to those who relied upon newspapers for their knowledge of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Today we see early events in terms of their known outcomes. In the Thirties too few had the vision to understand the longterm implications of daily events.

Indeed human rights coverage in the 1930's can be seen as a lesson in failure against which later successes can be measured. The limits of human rights coverage in the Thirties can also be seen as a consciousness raising lesson boosting sensitivity to and coverage of such issues in the years after World War II.

From the point of view of hindsight it seems almost incredible that reputable American media could have so thoroughly missed the human rights implications of the Hitler and Stalin policies.

There were indirect pressures to be cautious, especially if claims of abuse could not be verified by official sources. Rumors might abound, but hard information was sometimes hard to get, especially if an abuse were in an area of a country where journalists were denied access. A journalist's personal views, cautious incredulity, careerist opportunism, or desire to avoid a costly expulsion could all inhibit reporting on human rights.

"Getting along" with one's government host meant prized official interviews and permission to travel, which could be crucial for a journalist who sought to beat his competition.

News organizations also differed in their interest in these events, the space they had available, and their concept of a credible and balanced news story.

HITLER'S ANTI-SEMITISM: IMAGE SLOW TO DEVELOP:
THE REPORTING OF RALPH BARNES

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, yet transformation of his anti-semitic views into action came only gradually with the passage of the Nurenberg laws in September 1935, the transfer of Jewish businesses to "Aryans" in 1937, and the mass anti-Jewish riots of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938.

In the late 1930's, especially after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia and annexation of Austria, Jews in Germany were increasingly incarcerated in concentration camps. But it was not until the Wansee conference of January 1942 that Hitler officially enacted a policy of mass extermination.

Before that point reporters had no "holocaust" to cover - only a variety of anti-Semitic acts and ideological pronouncements the future of which could only be speculated upon. Few, including most Jews in Germany itself, were able to predict the ultimate emergence of the "final solution."

To evaluate media coverage of the holocaust one must thus move from the grand question: "why did they miss it or fail to predict it?" to an examination of how the evolution of Nazi policy was covered over a period of years.

The topic must be subdivided, for example: how adequately was the growing anti-Semitism of early Nazi policy reported, ranging from the 1933 boycott of Jewish businesses to the 1935 Nuremberg laws designed to disenfranchise German Jews, to the smashing of Jewish businesses in the Kristallnacht of November, 1938?; how adequately were the first massacres of Jews in Nazi-occupied territories reported, beginning in the summer of 1941 and escalating into 1942.

Finally, how was the "Final Solution," decided at the Wansee conference of early 1942, and gradually executed in the remaining war years, eventually made known to the world?

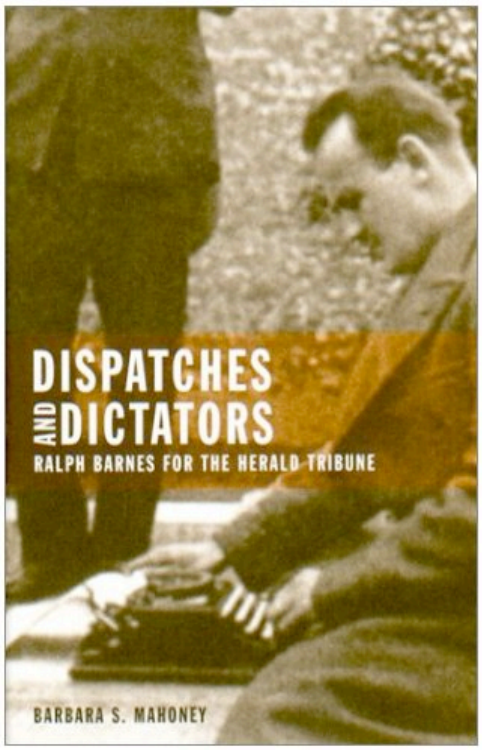
Those correspondents who focused on growth of authoritarian rule and the importance of official ideology were most likely to put a "spin" on their coverage which made later events less surprising. This was often true in the brilliant work of Ralph Barnes of the New York Herald Tribune in his coverage of the rising concentrated power of both Hitler and Stalin.

In the 1930's many other editors and reporters saw dictatorship or authoritarianism as only one part of the story to be covered. One man rule often seemed an understandable "part of the landscape" as Europe struggled to cope with the collapse of the world economy in the Thirties.

While most dispatches from this period seem hopelessly dated, not so with Barnes -- who did not "miss the forest for

the trees." Same for the perceptive coverage of both Hitler and Stalin by the Manchester Guardian.

Very, very rarely do the perceptions of a journalist on the spot jive with the later perspectives of an historian.



STALIN'S BRUTALITY: AN IMAGE SUPPRESSED

In contrast to Hitler, Stalin's policies drastically affected the lives of millions at a very early point, beginning in 1932 when he declared war on the independent peasantry known as "kulaks" to collectivize agriculture as a foundation for rapid industrialization. The Collectivization beginning in 1932 is today believed to have killed millions, and was especially deadly in the Ukraine.

The show trials and execution of top Communist Party and military leaders in 1937 provided the most public symbolism for the eight to ten million lives estimated lost in the two years following the great purge begun by Stalin in 1936.

The Ukraine famine of 1933 took several million lives. Yet few outsiders knew anything about it. Joseph Stalin systematically and successfully covered up the deadly results of his forced agricultural collectivization.

Western correspondents in the Soviet Union who knew about the calamity, such as Walter Duranty of The New York Times (who later won a Pulitizer for his Soviet coverage) frequently "pulled their punches." Duranty and others screened out the horror of emaciated hunger-crazed peasants groveling for scraps of food.

In contrast Stalin confined to Moscow Ralph Barnes of the New York Herald Tribune for disclosing that millions were dying during the Soviet collectivization of agriculture.

Desire to avoid costly expulsion, as well as sympathy for the Soviet experiment tempted correspondents to take the cautious path. True, some fiercely anti-communist western conservatives seized on ÈmigrÈ accounts of massive suffering. Others more sympathetic to the Soviets dismissed such accounts as self-interested propaganda.

More than half a century later two path breaking books vividly told story of this media failure: Robert Conquest's The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine, Oxford University Press (1986) and S.J. Taylor's Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty; The New York Time's Man in Moscow, Oxford University Press (1990).

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