

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Up in smoke

by [Andrew Roberts](#)

On *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* by Nicholson Baker.

Was Sir Winston Churchill an oafish, bloodthirsty, sadistic, hypocritical, anti-Semitic alcoholic? The American novelist Nicholson Baker—whose previous works have been about phone sex and masturbation—certainly seems to think so, for *Human Smoke* is intended as nonfiction. [\[1\]](#)

The book has been lauded by the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín in a *New York Times* review—“riveting and fascinating”—and even the normally sane Simon Winchester has described it as “a quite extraordinary book—impossible to put down, impossible to forget.” Yet once one works out the sly techniques by which the author tries to persuade the reader that Churchill was a foul warmonger, the book is anything but. It uses the technique of juxtaposing bald quotations, ripped out of context, to try to place Churchill on the same moral plane as Adolf Hitler.

The first trick is one of which Dr. Goebbels himself would have been proud: the Big Lie. By quoting a couple of sentences from an article Churchill wrote in *The Illustrated Sunday Herald* on February 8, 1920 about Jews being involved in a “sinister” and “worldwide conspiracy,” Baker implies that Churchill was an anti-Semite. Yet if one goes back to the original article itself, it is immediately clear that Churchill was only referring to those Russian Jews who had embraced Bolshevism, which was indeed both a sinister and a worldwide conspiracy at that time. “We owe to the Jews,” he wrote in that same article (but not quoted by Baker), “a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind, worth in fact the fruits of all wisdom and learning put together.” Far from being anti-Semitic, Churchill was the leading pro-Jewish politician of his day, a Zionist and a consistent supporter of the state of Israel.

Similarly, Baker rips two sentences from a letter from Churchill to the head of the RAF, Hugh Trenchard, to imply that Churchill wanted mustard gas used to kill Britain’s enemies in Iraq in 1920. “I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes,” Baker quotes, but if one returns to the original memorandum, found in the Churchill Papers in Cambridge, it goes on to make it clear that the idea was not to use “deadly gasses” against the enemy, but rather ones aimed at “making his eyes water by means of lachrymatory [i.e., tear] gas.” Churchill goes on to write: “The moral effect should be so good as to keep loss of life reduced to a minimum” and “Gasses can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror yet would leave no serious permanent effect on most of those affected.” Can one imagine Hitler writing such a thing to Himmler? Anyone who can’t tell the difference between tear gas and Zyklon B should not be writing history books, and *The New York Times* should have given this book to an historian rather than a novelist for review.

Of Europe's Jews in November 1940, Baker writes that "Hitler didn't want them," preferring them to live in Madagascar, whereas "Churchill wanted to starve them until they revolted against their oppressors." The truth was Hitler wanted the Jews dead, and Churchill never wanted to starve them at all. To pretend otherwise is ludicrous, but then, as Baker explains in an interview on amazon.com: "I used Wikipedia during the writing of the book, especially to check facts."

It is true that Churchill opposed making peace with Hitler after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, but that was because the Nazis refused to disgorge that country, yet he is made to look the warmonger because of it. Churchill's policy of trying to starve Germany into surrender is presented as criminal, but it had worked in the Great War. Baker argues that Churchill was "the chief obstacle" to feeding the starving peoples of Holland, Belgium, Poland, and Norway, ignoring the fact that all food production was in the hands of the Nazis in those countries, and donations from abroad would have gone to feed the German, not the occupied, peoples.

The book is dedicated to pre-war and wartime "American and British pacifists" who, Baker claims, "failed, but they were right." In fact it was they who bore much of the responsibility for allowing Hitler to believe that the West would not fight, with the Peace Pledge Union and other pacifist campaigns of the 1930s. Far from being "sane and wise," the pacifists actually helped bring on precisely the war they feared. The hero of this book is Mahatma Gandhi, who is treated entirely on his own terms as a saintly swami and holy man. Yet it was Gandhi who during the London Blitz advised Londoners: "Invite Hitler and Mussolini to take what they want of the countries you call your possessions. Let them take possession of your beautiful island with its many beautiful buildings. You will give all this, but neither your minds nor your souls."

A very large number, if not the majority, of Baker's quotations come from *The New York Times*, which he absurdly describes as "the single richest resource for the history and prehistory of the war years" when in fact that paper consistently underplayed Nazi atrocities in its pages. In particular *The New York Times*, possibly because they feared people might think of it a "Jewish" paper, made sure reports of the Holocaust were insanely brief and buried deep inside the paper. On June 27, 1942, for example, the *Times* devoted just two inches to the news that "700,000 Jews were reported slain in Poland." A week later, it noted that gas chambers were being used to kill one thousand Jews a day—but only on page six. (The true figures were of course far higher.) On November 25, 1942, it reported that there had been roundups, gassings, and the disappearance of 90 percent of Warsaw's ghetto population—but it only made page ten. The following month, on December 9, 1942, its report that two million Jews had been killed and five million more faced extermination appeared on page twenty. Even after D-Day, on July 2, 1944, Nicholson Baker's favorite paper of record reported that 400,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to their deaths so far, and 350,000 more were likely to be killed in the next weeks. Yet this news received only four column inches on page twelve. (That edition's front page carried an analysis of the problem of New York holiday crowds on the move.) The shameful truth is that during World War II, no article about the Jews' plight ever qualified as the *Times*' leading story of the day, nor has *The New York Times* ever properly acknowledged its failings in this matter. "Such was *The New York Times*'s influence as the premier American source of wartime news," the media commentator Tom Gross has stated, "that had it reported the Holocaust properly, other American papers would probably have followed." Yet this is the paper that Mr. Baker has chosen to use as his central resource.

Baker regularly chooses to take Churchill's jokes seriously, either out of a lack of humor or on purpose. Thus when in 1922 Churchill told the Commons that Berlin would have been bombed if the Great War had continued much longer, and only survived "owing to our having run short of Germans and enemies before the experiments were completed," Baker chooses to ignore the obvious gag intended. Equally, it is unclear whether Baker himself is joking when he states that Churchill drank more than an alcoholic could. His constant references to Churchill's drinking is reminiscent of

the works of David Irving, Clive Ponting, and the other revisionists, but like them he fails to prove that it ever affected, let alone impaired, Churchill's political judgment on any single issue during the war.

Much of Baker's book is self-contradictory. In October 1940, for example, when a Conservative MP demanded the unrestricted bombing of German population centers, Churchill replied: "You and others may desire to kill women and children," but the Government would restrict itself to military objectives, because: "My motto is 'Business before pleasure.'" It was a joke, but is presented by Baker as if Churchill were a murderous sadist. Yet the anecdote is also capable of another interpretation, one that undermines Baker's accusations that the British Government did indeed deliberately target civilian populations rather than military and industrial installations. So keen is he to heap ordure on Churchill that he thus contradicts his own assertions. When Colm Tóibín states that Baker has written "a serious and conscientious contribution to the debate about pacifism, an eloquent and passionate assault on the idea that the deliberate targeting of civilians can ever be justified," that remark about "Business before pleasure" should be borne in mind.

Baker also contradicts himself when quoting a letter from Churchill to his Information Minister, Alfred Duff Cooper, from June 1940 saying that the press and broadcast media "should be asked to handle air raids in a cool way and on a diminishing tone of public interest. Pray try to impress this upon the newspaper authorities and persuade them to help." If the British media were under such heavy censorship as Baker states, would the Prime Minister be asking the Information Minister to "persuade" the press barons "to help," or ordering them?

Baker naturally trots the corny old lie about Churchill having prior knowledge of the bombing of Coventry from Enigma decrypts, yet "Nobody called up Coventry to tell the people who lived there that an enormous attack was coming their way in several hours' time." In fact, as Sir Martin Gilbert and the director of Bletchley Park, Simon Greenish, have often pointed out, the British cryptographers had been unable to identify Coventry as the target, because the codeword "Korn" had not appeared in decrypts before and so was not recognized as referring to that city. As Greenish attests:

It was the RAF who identified the target as Coventry at about 3 pm that afternoon from the German navigation beams. The defenses were immediately warned. Churchill had ordered the strengthening of the defenses of the Midlands some two weeks before, and this had been carried out. There was nothing he could have done to further strengthen the defenses that had not already been implemented, had he known the target was Coventry earlier that day.

Churchill—without Baker giving any proof whatsoever—is also effectively accused of being complicit in the notorious forgery known as the Zinoviev Letter, which led to the downfall of Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government in the 1924 general election. Speculation upon insinuation, which is all Baker produces, does not amount to evidence in a work of nonfiction.

Furthermore bald statements such as "Everyone agreed that Churchill was a maladroit administrator and a capricious military strategist. He had no sense of proportion" need to be qualified by the fact that he enjoyed popularity ratings—in 1940 as today—far higher than any other British prime minister since opinion polling began, so "everyone" in that context needs to be qualified.

Small mistakes, such as the size of the War Cabinet—five, not sixteen—or the colors of Churchill's siren suits (many other than just blue), or the correct spelling of Ditchley Park, are inevitable if Baker prefers Internet search engines to first-hand archival research, but if he is to make Churchill out to be malevolent and dishonest at every turn, the author ought to have produced better source references than [www.authentichistory.com](http://www.authentichistory.com) and intellectually discredited spook-writers like John

Costello. These do not constitute a scholarly apparatus. “The French were calling Churchill ‘The Famisher,’” writes Baker, for example, but it turns out that the phrase derives from the then Nazi-controlled newspaper *Le Figaro* in January 1941. For such a series of vicious allegations, akin to those that lost David Irving his credibility as an historian, we need more credible evidence than a few websites and the *New York Times* newspaper archive.

The mass arrest of ethnic Germans—including Jews—in Britain during the invasion scare of 1940 is equated to the contemporaneous mass roundups of Jews on the Continent, without the rather central difference being pointed out that fifty thousand people were released by the end of the year in Britain, whereas in Europe the Jews’ fate was very different. Similarly although it was true that the Allies considered using insecticides, bugs, and plant diseases to destroy German crops, the idea was turned down, a fact Baker fails to mention.

Hitler’s invasion of Yugoslavia is blamed on King Peter II’s coup there, which was “encouraged and funded by the British Special Operations Executive,” without mentioning how popular it was with ordinary Yugoslavs. As so often, Baker shows the Führer merely responding to provocations and aggressions by the inveterate warmonger Churchill. (Needless to say there are also completely historically irrelevant references to Fallujah and Basra—both obscure backwaters during World War II—in order to make modern-day political points.)

Along with Churchill, the other villain of this book is the Royal Air Force. A stand-alone paragraph states “The RAF dropped more than 150 tons of bombs on India. It was 1925,” which gives the impression that the British were terrorizing their own Indian subjects. In fact Wing Commander R. C. M. Pink’s 5<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, and 60<sup>th</sup> squadrons were bombing the Mahsud raiders in Waziristan in order to protect the peaceful agrarian Indians of the plains below the North-West frontier. Between August 9 and November 18, 1919, for example, Mahsud and Wazir raiders committed 182 outrages in Zhob, Derajat, and the Punjab during which they killed a total of 225 people, wounded and kidnapped four hundred more, and carried off large numbers of animals and a wealth of movable property. Today the 1925 aerial campaign is taught as a textbook example of how to pacify one of the most difficult regions of the world, where Osama bin Laden is thought to be hiding out. Of course if Baker’s insinuation were true, and the RAF had been trying to terrorize the three hundred million inhabitants of the vast subcontinent of India, even 150,000 tons of bombs would not have begun to achieve it. The huge majority of Indians fully supported the punishment of the Waziri tribes for their incursions, but you would never have guessed that from Mr. Baker.

The author seems to have read all the books that criticize the aerial bombing of Germany, but none of those explaining and defending it are listed in his (generally insubstantial) bibliography. Nor is mention made of the testimony from Joseph Goebbels and Albert Speer that Allied bombing significantly weakened the Third Reich’s ability to continue fighting. Instead Baker ludicrously states that “Bombing was, to Churchill, a way of enlightening city dwellers as to the hellishness of remote battlefields by killing them.” Every time the RAF hit a girls’ school rather than a railway marshalling yard, it is recorded with glee, as though the kind of precision bombing available today was present in the Allies’ aerial armory. At one point Baker even writes of how “[t]he British leaders were now in place for the pan-Germanic firestorms of 1942, 1943, 1944, and 1945.”

Churchill is even tangentially blamed for the Holocaust. Baker quotes approvingly the view that “as soon as England made its peace with Germany and stopped blockading ocean traffic—the Jews would go away [to Madagascar] after being stripped of whatever wealth they might have. It was all contingent, though, on peace with Churchill.” The fact that such an offer of an unimpeded passage of Jews away from Europe was never made by the Nazis to Churchill does not prevent Baker from insinuating the idea into his readers’ minds that it was scuppered by the British prime minister’s obsession with blockade. While others in the drama (including Hitler) “say” things, Baker has Churchill “booming” or “haranguing.” There is even a reference to the Führer’s “conscience,” but the

overall assumption is that Churchill has none.

Churchill was, as they say of generals, a killer of men, states Baker, yet it is almost impossible to mention a national leader in history—democratic or non-democratic—whose decisions have not led to the deaths of men. Just as to govern is to choose, so to lead a nation is either to sanction killing or meek surrender. Thankfully Churchill was unwilling to choose the latter, unlike Baker’s heroes in the peace movement. There are fifteen positive references to the Quakers in this book, but if Britain had been Quaker in 1940 there is a good chance that Civilization would have been extinguished by Nazism. It is not a possibility that Mr. Baker considers as he lauds the conscientious objectors over the men—like Churchill—who had to take the far tougher decisions. (Despite the many references to how tough it was to be a conscientious objector in Britain or America, the fact remains that the Nazis shot theirs as traitors.)

Having just returned from a trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is only half the size that the Nazis planned to make it before it was liberated in 1945, I find the prospect of a Nazi-dominated Europe—which American and British pacifists would have done precisely nothing to prevent—just as abhorrent as pacifists find “the obscenity of war.” When the alternative is Hitlerism, the choice of non-resistance is even more obscene.

A curious torpor overcomes this reader about half way through this book, due to the sheer inexorability of the bias; if it had been more nuanced, better researched, or more intelligent, then interest might have been sustained, but no. Sometimes the sheer ignorance of some of Baker’s statements reignites interest: “If Hitler moved East, England would have no war to fight.” The author clearly believes that Britain should have accepted Hitler’s offer of peace with Britain in August 1940, not realizing that it was an obvious trap designed to facilitate his coming invasion of the USSR, for which he was contemporaneously ordering his senior Wehrmacht Staff to plan.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Baker would have done better to stick to phone sex and masturbation rather than to undertake this foray into nonfiction. The book ends in December 1941, after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor as a result of President Roosevelt’s supposed “provocations” of Tokyo. Needless to say Baker concentrates as much on the “dozens” of Honolulu civilians who fell victim to “misfiring American anti-aircraft shells” than on the thousands of non-civilians killed by the Japanese.

The title of the book refers to a phrase that the author claims was made by the former German Chief of Staff, Franz Halder: “when he was imprisoned in Auschwitz late in the war, he saw flakes of human smoke blow into his cell.” It’s a powerful image, but sadly Halder never in fact set foot in Auschwitz, being held in Dachau and Flossenburg after the July Plot. It is fitting that Baker should have even misattributed the very title of his book. Perhaps he should have checked on Wikipedia.

## Notes

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1. *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*, by Nicholson Baker; Simon & Schuster, 576 pages, \$30. [Go back to the text.](#)

Andrew Roberts

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