

## George Orwell on politics and war

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### Abstract

George Orwell is not generally remembered for his views on strategy. Nevertheless a careful reading of his written work reveals a coherent appreciation of war's strategic dimension. For Orwell, war is a necessary adjunct to politics, and the utility of strategic action should be based on rational considerations of cost and benefit. He rejected pacifism and self-imposed restraints on warfare on the basis that such positions proceeded from unexamined emotional commitments, and were neither instrumentally nor morally sound. He also maintained that the enemy's political values are an essential input into effective strategic calculations. On this latter basis he criticised the strategic prescriptions of H. G. Wells and B. H. Liddell Hart for limited war with Nazi Germany.

### Keywords

Orwell; Strategy; War; Politics

George Orwell is probably best known today for his political satire *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is in many respects his crowning achievement in so far as his writings on totalitarianism are concerned. And yet it was preceded by various other novels and documentaries, along with a great many essays, that continue to repay careful reading. Indeed had he never written his final book, his position as one of the finest essayists of the twentieth century would nevertheless have been secure. Politics do of course bulk large in his work, but Orwell was a man of wide interests and these were often reflected in the subject matter he chose to write about. Amongst the insightful critiques of imperialism, fascism and Stalinism one can also find sound advice on making tea, an affectionate portrait of Charles Dickens, and a careful sociological analysis of what used to be called 'saucy' postcards of the type bought on seaside holidays in England. War also features frequently in Orwell's writings, which is not surprising given the times in which he lived. He produced, *inter alia*, a powerful account of his experiences fighting in Spain, wrote a series of competent lectures on tactics for the British Home Guard (in which he served during the Second World War, being too unhealthy to join the regular army) and provided vivid portraits of life in London under bombardment by German rockets.

To date, however, no effort has been made to identify the general character of Orwell's thinking on war as it had developed by the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> This may be because it is not immediately apparent that

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Orwell's views on war have been ignored. For example, they figure prominently in Peter Marks, *George Orwell the Essayist: Literature, Politics and the Periodical Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011). Two relevant essays are John Rossi, "'My country, right or left': Orwell's patriotism', in John Rodden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 87–99 and John Newsinger, 'Orwell, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust', in Rodden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (2007), pp. 112–25. John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave,

he *did* think about war in this way. He himself never assembled his views on the subject in one place, but remained content to leave them scattered across his many writings – often on what were ostensibly unrelated topics. Moreover because many of his key thoughts on war appeared in short essays or reviews, they can seem undeveloped when read in isolation one from the other. This, in combination with his confrontational style (for he frequently wrote in response to positions with which he profoundly disagreed), might lead the reader to conclude that such views on war that he did possess were fragmentary and negative in character. And yet a different picture emerges should one care to hunt across the breadth of Orwell's writing, which is a (relatively) manageable task these days due to the publication of his *Complete Works* in some twenty volumes.<sup>2</sup> This painstakingly edited collection includes not only the wealth of writing he produced for publication but also his letters, diaries, and wartime radio broadcasts – some 3,646 items in total. As such it is an incomparable resource for piecing together his thinking about war, and indeed many other subjects. Viewed from this wider perspective, the many fragments cohere readily enough into a clearer picture.

Orwell, it emerges, was not much interested in the technical aspects of war and had little to say about weapons and tactics beyond his prescriptions for the Home Guard. Nor did he contribute to the debates surrounding the operational employment of tanks and aircraft, which the likes of Basil Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller stirred up during the interwar period. Instead, his concerns were chiefly with the relationship between war and politics. Orwell was at pains to demonstrate that politics ultimately rests on the will and ability to employ force in its defence, and that the scale and scope of the violence required reflects the depth of the dispute between belligerents. It was on this basis that he advocated the prosecution of total war against Nazi Germany, despite the various risks this entailed. Those who rejected this necessary evil were, he maintained, guilty of allowing their squeamishness about violence to distort their reasoning, or dangerously naïve about the threat posed by Hitler. Orwell was, in other words, very much interested in matters of strategy and the qualities required for sound strategic decision-making.

As such, there are close connections with Orwell's thinking about wider political matters. Like others of his generation he was both unconvinced by (if not entirely unsympathetic to) the idealism of the 1930s, and alarmed by the subsequent emergence of realist alternatives. As such his writing shared something in common with contemporaneous academic debates about the nature of international relations. He was unfamiliar with the specialist literature, but read widely amongst the public intellectuals of his day who wrote on political matters. In the likes of British philosopher C. E. M. Joad, he detected a naïve faith in the ability of reason to regulate human affairs in accordance with a universal hedonic calculus.<sup>3</sup> And, at the other end of the scale, he was particularly exercised by the US writer James Burnham whom he charged with placing the competition for power at the heart of

2001) is particularly interesting on Orwell's revolutionary patriotism during the early stages of the Second World War. Orwell's BBC broadcasts on the war have been collected in W. J. West, *Orwell: The War Commentaries* (London: Duckworth, 1985). Bernard Crick's *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980) charts Orwell's changing views about war consequent on his personal experiences. The influence of Spain on Orwell and his writing is discussed in Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive From the Camp of Victory* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), pp. 62–74.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, 20 volumes (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986–7, 1998); hereafter cited as CWGO.

<sup>3</sup> For Orwell on Joad see: 'Review of *Journey Through the War Mind* by C. E. M. Joad; *A Psychologist's Wartime Diary* by Anthony Weymouth; *America Expects* by Hector Bolitho', *Time and Tide* (8 June 1940), CWGO XII, 635, pp. 178–9; 'Review of *The Adventures of the Young Soldier in Search of the Better World* by C. E. M. Joad', *The Listener* (21 October 1943), CWGO XV, 2327. For more on Joad himself see C. E. M. Joad, *Under the Fifth Rib: A Belligerent Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1932).

his political analysis.<sup>4</sup> Orwell himself steadfastly maintained that politics ultimately rests on force, whilst also denouncing claims to the effect that it should only be about force. In such matters, it was necessary to steer a course between two unsatisfactory extremes, cleaving whole-heartedly to neither of them.

With Britain at war, questions of military strategy brought such tensions into sharp focus for Orwell. Although wars could hardly be conducted on idealist principles, slavish adherence to the dictates of realism risked opening the door to totalitarianism. It paid, therefore, to be clear about why one was fighting, and about what this entailed in terms of military effort and associated risks. In what follows I develop these points in relation to the arguments Orwell made: (1) against pacifism, and (2) in support of the area bombing of German cities, along with his criticism of the more restrained strategic prescriptions for fighting Germany advanced by (3) H. G. Wells and (4) Liddell Hart.

## Politics, war, and pacifism

According to the poet Herbert Read, Orwell's profound humanitarianism left him conflicted on the question of war. 'Consistently he would have been a pacifist, but he could not resist the quixotic impulse to spring to arms in defence of the weak or oppressed.'<sup>5</sup> This is only partly correct. The humanitarian impulse was undoubtedly strong in Orwell, and there is likewise a touch of Cervantes to his exploits during the Spanish Civil War. Nevertheless, his attitude towards war *per se* rested on intellectual as opposed to emotional foundations. More specifically, his analysis of politics left him in no doubt that war is sometimes a regrettable necessity that must not be shirked if worse fates are to be avoided. There is, he maintained, an intimate link between politics and force such that one is not possible without the other. Whilst society routinely operates through the 'good will of common men' this alone cannot be expected to preserve it for very long. A willingness and ability to use force are also necessary if aggression is to be resisted. Indeed a 'government which refused to use violence in its own defence would cease almost immediately to exist, because it could be overthrown by any body of men, or even any individual, that was less scrupulous.'<sup>6</sup> The same point also pertains to relationships between states. Independence, Orwell maintained, requires the ability to resist external aggression by means of war, which in turn demands the capacity to manufacture large numbers of the latest weapons.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise a state cannot be free from the threat of subjugation. Ultimately, therefore, every polity rests on coercion, even if this is not apparent on a daily basis. Consequently by accepting government, and the protection it confers on society, the citizens of a state must, on grounds of consistency, accept the legitimacy of war – in principle and sometimes also in fact. Thus, whatever he personally felt about war, the logic of its necessity was the compelling point for Orwell. Personal distaste needed to be acknowledged if present, and then set aside.

<sup>4</sup> For Orwell's views on realism and Burnham see Ian Hall, 'A "shallow piece of naughtiness": George Orwell on political realism', *Millennium*, 36:2 (2008), pp. 191–215.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Read, '1984', *World Review*, New Series:16 (June 1950), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> "'No, not one": Review of *No Such Liberty* by Alex Comfort', *The Adelphi* (October 1941), CWGO XIII, 855, p. 40. For related comments see also: 'Review of *Jail Journey* by Jim Phelan', *Horizon* (June 1940), CWGO XII, 629, p. 171; 'War-time Diary' (23 March 1941), CWGO XII, 780, p. 456; 'To the Reverend Iorwerth Jones, 8 April 1941', CWGO XII, 785, pp. 466–7; 'Culture and Democracy' (22 November 1941), CWGO XIII, 885, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> 'Gandhi in Mayfair: Review of *Beggar My Neighbour* by Lionel Fielden', *Horizon* (September 1943), CWGO XV, 2257, p. 211. See also, 'Comment on Robert Duval's *Whitehall's Road to Mandalay* and correspondence on nationalism', *Tribune* (2 April 1943), CWGO XV (1989), pp. 49, 52–3.

It was on this basis that Orwell took issue with the pacifist intellectuals of his day, whom he criticised for lacking ‘the intellectual courage to think their thoughts down to the roots’ with the result that their squeamishness about violence was allowed to obscure the problematic realities of their position.<sup>8</sup> For one thing pacifists who looked down their noses at the unpleasant business of war, all the while accepting the protection of the state they lived in, were behaving hypocritically. By refusing to dirty their hands, they were passing responsibility for their security onto others whilst denigrating their efforts in the process. They were, as Rudyard Kipling had put it, ‘making mock of uniforms that guard you while you sleep’.<sup>9</sup> To avoid such charges pacifists would need to renounce the social contract and step outside the state, which was something they could not do.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, as British citizens it was logically impossible for pacifists to adopt a position of neutrality in a war with Germany. Refusing military service, Orwell argued, was ‘objectively speaking’ tantamount to striking a blow for Nazism, just as a German pacifist would effectively be striking a blow for Britain.<sup>11</sup> In war (as Clausewitz had observed), what one side neglects to do redounds to the other’s advantage – although in this case Orwell was evidently drawing on his own past experience as an imperial police officer. Just such a line of reasoning had, he maintained, previously led British officials to conclude that Gandhi’s renunciation of violence as a means of securing Indian independence was beneficial to imperial rule. ‘Strictly speaking, as a Nationalist, he was an enemy, but since in every crisis he would exert himself to prevent violence – which, from the British point of view, meant preventing any effective action whatever – he could be regarded as “our man”’.<sup>12</sup>

Of course this zero-sum logic mattered only if meaningful distinctions existed between the two belligerents, and certain pacifists claimed there was nothing to choose between the coercive practices of states like imperial Britain and Nazi Germany. In his controversial wartime novel, *No Such Liberty*, the anarchist Alex Comfort portrayed a hapless young doctor who escapes Germany only to suffer all manner of misfortunes at the hands of the British authorities.<sup>13</sup> Although the British are not wilfully cruel, a combination of fear and poor organisation renders the practice of internment a frightful one that breaks its victims morally as well as physically. In his book review for the pacifist journal *Adelphi*, Orwell understood Comfort to be arguing that the choice between wartime Germany and Britain was no real choice at all. The implication here, therefore, was that by withholding military service the pacifist was not unwittingly serving the cause of evil. By way of response,

<sup>8</sup> ‘London letter’, 1 January 1942, *Partisan Review* (March–April 1941), CWGO XIII, 913, p. 110. For context see Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914–1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Rudyard Kipling’, *Horizon* (February 1942), CWGO XIII, 948, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Although many tried earnestly to do just this, in so far as it was possible. Some pacifists, for example, took to self-sufficiency in order to reduce their reliance on food provided by the wartime state. D. S. Savage became accomplished in this regard. See his ‘Testament of a conscientious objector’, *The Objectors*, ed. Clifford Simmons (Isle of Man: Anthony Gibbs & Phillips, n.d. [orig. pub. 1965]), pp. 82–122.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Nicholas Moore vs. George Orwell’, *Partisan Review* (January–February 1942), CWGO XIII, 854, p. 39; “No, not one”, p. 40; ‘Notes on the way’, *Time and Tide* (30 March/6 April 1940), CWGO XII, 604, pp. 123–4. This reasoning evidently played a part in Orwell’s decision (despite misgivings) to produce his war commentaries for the British Broadcasting Corporation. In 1942 he wrote to George Woodcock that ‘one can’t effectively remain outside the war & by working inside an institution like the BBC one can perhaps deodorise it to some small extent’. ‘To George Woodcock’ (2 December 1942), CWGO XIV, 1710, p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Reflections on Gandhi’, *Partisan Review* (January 1949), CWGO XX, 3156, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Comfort, *No Such Liberty* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1941). According to Comfort his novel is a fictionalised version of real events.

Orwell allowed that all states are necessarily coercive in some degree, but he nevertheless declared it wrong to argue that there was nothing to choose between them in this regard. British internment camps were not in the same league as Germany's concentration camps; the lack of refugee flows *into* Germany made that clear enough.<sup>14</sup> And although it was easy to criticise British democracy for its many real hypocrisies, efforts to equate it with Nazism rested on the spurious argument 'that a difference of degree is not a difference'.<sup>15</sup> If secret police did actually operate in Britain then nobody was afraid of them, and a journalist such as Orwell could say what he wished and 'safely ignore their presence'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the fact that a British pacifist was free to criticise his own country, whereas a German pacifist was not, demonstrated that the degree of political freedom each state permitted differed sufficiently to make relative judgements possible, and to make choosing sides politically meaningful.

I know enough of British imperialism not to like it, but I would support it against Nazism or Japanese imperialism, as the lesser evil. Similarly I would support the USSR against Germany because I think the USSR cannot altogether escape its past and retains enough of the original ideas of the Revolution to make it a more hopeful phenomenon than Nazi Germany.<sup>17</sup>

Orwell likewise expressed a clear preference for America over Russia, despite his belief that such an alignment would probably preserve capitalism in Britain. This was a major concession for a socialist intimately familiar with the chronic poverty of the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> But choosing sides, he observed, always involves a compromise with one's principles. In politics, there are no wholly good options – only shades of evil – and, try as they might, pacifists cannot escape politics.

A more troubling line of argument for Orwell was that the degree of military effort required to defeat Nazi Germany risked destroying British democracy. Many liberals and pacifists alike were concerned that the war would become increasingly 'total' in terms of its demands, eventually dominating all areas of national life and comprehensively militarising British society in the process. Fighting, in other words, would ultimately foster the same fascistic values at home that the war was intended to eradicate abroad. In a subsequent argument with Orwell in the pages of *Partisan Review*, Alex Comfort wondered whether

Hitler's greatest and irretrievable victory over here was when he persuaded the English people that the only way to lick Fascism was to imitate it. He puts us in a dilemma which cannot be practically rebutted, only broken away from – 'If I win, you have political Fascism victorious: if you want to beat me, you must assimilate as much of its philosophy as you can, so that I am bound to win either way.'<sup>19</sup>

The poet D. S. Savage (whose name belied his nature) likewise pointed to the same grim irony when he argued that by opposing war, the pacifist 'might therefore be called the *only genuine* opponent of Fascism'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "No, not one", p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> 'Fascism and democracy', *The Left News* (February 1941), CWGO XII, p. 378.

<sup>16</sup> 'Culture and Democracy' (22 November 1941), CWGO XIII, 885, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> 'To Noel Willmet' (18 May 1944), CWGO XVI, 2741, p. 191. See also 'Notes on the way', p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> 'Burnham's view of the contemporary world struggle', *The New Leader* (New York) (29 March 1947), CWGO XIX, 3204, p. 103; 'To Victor Gollancz' (25 March 1947), CWGO XIX, 3200, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> 'Pacifism and the war: a controversy. By D. S. Savage, George Woodcock, Alex Comfort, George Orwell', *Partisan Review* (September–October 1942), CWGO XIII, 1270, p. 396.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392, emphasis in original.

Orwell appreciated the pressures that war could place on democratic practices. In *Homage to Catalonia* he had previously noted that ‘war suffers a kind of progressive degradation with every month that it continues, because such things as individual liberty and a truthful press are simply not compatible with military efficiency’.<sup>21</sup> Still, in his judgement, waging war against foreign fascism did not entail an inevitable descent into fascism at home. The relationship was not a mechanical one, and much depended on the more fundamental political characteristics of the country in question. To be sure, the demands of total war brought with them an increased element of state compulsion in Britain. Conscription into the armed forces and the coalmines were obvious examples in this regard, as were government intervention in industrial production and the rationing of foodstuffs.

But despite all this, he believed that there remained a critical difference between the situations in Britain and Germany. State control in Britain remained something imposed on individuals from the outside. There was no thoroughgoing totalitarian attempt to abolish the individual from within by controlling what could be thought. This, argued Orwell, was because of the particular character of English political life, which had flourished long enough to acquire an element of ‘decency’ that was absent from politics in the new totalitarian states. The centre of a maritime empire long protected by the guns of the Royal Navy, Britain had been spared the trauma of military defeat and revolution at home. It therefore retained a traditional political elite that was more concerned with outward shows of loyalty than inward ideological conformity. For their part the British people lacked the habit of deference to authority that would permit a more intrusive policing. Nor were they prone these days to the nationalism of the jingo, which had featured so conspicuously during the previous war. They were patriotic – content with their own way of life and willing to defend it – but not interested in imposing it on others. As such the war was considered an unfortunate job of work to be got through, rather than an opportunity for aggrandisement at the expense of lesser sorts.<sup>22</sup> Germany was not therefore a model for Britain in this regard, and pacifism was not the only genuine alternative to fascism.

In this respect, Orwell’s sense of the British political climate was sounder than that of his pacifist opponents. Total war did not lead to a total state. During the summer of 1945, he himself was subsequently moved to record his surprise on this point. In one of his regular letters to *Partisan Review* he noted that the prospect of Britain fighting for almost six years, without sacrificing its liberal inheritance in the process, would never have occurred to him.<sup>23</sup> But his political instincts had nevertheless proved broadly correct. Under pressure of war many liberal aspects of national life were held in abeyance, only to emerge once more with the end of hostilities. In many respects Churchill’s personal fate instantiates this process, the powerful and charismatic war leader being voted out of office in the general election of 1945 in preference for Atlee’s socialist vision of the peace.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> ‘Homage to Catalonia’, CWGO VI, 132. He also believed that preparation for total war with the Soviet Union was the factor most likely to bring about conditions such as those he described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. ‘Orwell’s Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, GWGO XX, 3634, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Much of this argument is taken from Orwell’s engaging sketch of Britain and its people, ‘*The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*’ (19 February 1941), CWGO XII, pp. 391–434.

<sup>23</sup> ‘London letter’, 5 June 1945, *Partisan Review* (Summer 1945), CWGO XVII, p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> Note, however, that Orwell never considered the point that Britain had been spared a series of ever-more difficult choices between military and domestic-political imperatives by the entry of the Soviet Union and United States into the war.

## Bombing German cities

The Royal Air Force's area bombing of German cities was a particularly controversial aspect of British strategy that attracted vocal criticism during the war, not least on moral grounds. Dissent was not limited to pacifist organisations. Public figures such as the Bishop of Chichester George Bell, Gilbert Murray, and George Bernard Shaw registered their objections.<sup>25</sup> So too did Liddell Hart. For his part, Orwell became involved in this controversy when he responded to Vera Brittain's powerful denunciation of the bombing campaign. Brittain had served as a volunteer nurse during the First World War and subsequently became a well-known novelist and pacifist, joining the Committee for the Abolition of Night Bombing (subsequently renamed the Bombing Restrictions Committee) on whose behalf she wrote the pamphlet *Seed of Chaos*.<sup>26</sup> The result was a compelling polemic. British and American people, she argued, were not being properly informed about the terrible consequences of the air raids carried out in their name. Euphemistic reportage of the bombing ('softening up ... neutralizing the target ... blanketing an industrial district') served to obscure the true scale of the death and destruction that was regularly being visited on German civilians. In support of her contention she assembled a wide range of sources that, taken together, were intended to expose these costs in a graphic manner, the idea being to shock her readers into a new sense of realisation about what was routinely being done in their name. If they were willing to endorse such terrible methods of warfare, she continued, what did this augur for the future of their own civilisation?

Orwell's reply to Brittain appeared in the May 1944 issue of *Tribune*. As with the case of pacifism, his criticism was that objections to the bombing owed more to emotional impulses than to reasoned argument. The real problem, he maintained, was not city bombing *per se*, but simply the barbaric nature of war itself. The idea that warfare should be subject to limitation on humanitarian grounds was due to people's tendency to substitute careful thought on the matter with 'catchwords' such as 'killing civilians' and 'massacre of women and children'. These, he contended, were merely bundles of unexamined assumptions that did not stand up to scrutiny. As far as civilian casualties were concerned:

Why is it worse to kill civilians than soldiers? Obviously one must not kill children if it is in any way avoidable, but it is only in propaganda pamphlets that every bomb drops on a school or an orphanage. A bomb kills a cross-section of the population; but not quite a representative selection, because the children and expectant mothers are usually the first to be evacuated, and some of the young men will be away in the army. Probably a disproportionately large number of bomb victims will be middle-aged. (Up to date, German bombs have killed between six and seven thousand children in this country. This is, I believe, less than the number killed in road accidents in the same period.)<sup>27</sup>

As for supposedly more legitimate ways of making war, they were scarcely less ghastly than city bombing. Each German submarine sunk doomed dozens of young men to death by suffocation, whilst the ground war on the Russian Front was killing off tremendous numbers of soldiers on a more or less continual basis.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Richard Overy, *The Bombing War, Europe 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 181.

<sup>26</sup> The copy I consulted was reprinted under the title 'Massacre by bombing', *Fellowship*, Part Two, 10 (1944), pp. 49–64.

<sup>27</sup> 'As I please', 25, *Tribune* (19 May 1944), CWGO XVI, 2473, p. 193. On the matter of children, however, Orwell is vulnerable to the same criticism he aimed at Brittain. Why is it any worse to kill children than women?

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193–4.

Moreover, ‘international agreements to “limit” war ... are never kept when it pays to break them’. The patchy record of self-restraint in relation to gas warfare demonstrated that this was the result of self-interested calculation rather than humanitarian motives.

Long before the last war the nations had agreed not to use gas, but they used it all the same. This time they have refrained, merely because gas is comparatively ineffective in a war of movement, while its use against civilian populations would be sure to provoke reprisals in kind. Against an enemy who can’t hit back, e.g. the Abyssinians, it is used readily enough.

The reality, Orwell concluded, is that war’s barbarity is a reflection of who we are, and only by first admitting to our barbarism can we hope to make some changes for the better.<sup>29</sup> Anything else would merely be cosmetic in character.

Brittain responded to these charges the following month, taking Orwell to task for misreading her position. It was not so much with the killing of civilians she was concerned, as with the ‘moral deterioration’ that any nation must suffer as a result of stooping to such means, and the consequent ‘setback to European civilisation as a whole’. Furthermore, certain restraints on the means of war *had* thus far been observed. The United States had not yet employed gas against Japanese troops occupying defensive positions on Pacific islands. Nor had anyone thus far resorted to bacteriological warfare. A descent into unmitigated cruelty was not, therefore, the inevitable outcome of war, and attempts to ameliorate some of its worst aspects not necessarily hopeless.<sup>30</sup> Sadly, Orwell’s pessimism won out here, gas being employed by the Nazis to kill millions of civilians. The Japanese also employed bacteriological weapons, albeit on an experimental scale, in China and against Soviet troops.<sup>31</sup> The world at war was a harder place than Brittain cared to imagine.

Brittain’s assertion that Orwell had overlooked the main point of her pamphlet also seems a little unfair. She had indeed raised the question of ‘moral deterioration’, and her choice of title – *Seed of Chaos* – is evidently an allusion to this matter. Still, by far the most space was devoted to documenting the effects of bombing on German cities. And nor had she responded to Orwell’s principal charge on the matter of unproblematised sentiment. ‘Why’, he asked in a second letter to *Tribune*, ‘is gas or bacteriological warfare worse than the ordinary kind? Certainly the results of gas are horrible, but as Miss Brittain was a nurse in the last war she will know what a shell wound in the intestines is like.’ Here, in other words, was another of the unexamined ‘catchwords’ that featured so prominently in the arguments of those who opposed the bombing. And as for her point about the moral damage to European civilisation, Orwell observed that it did not take into account the nature of Nazi rule in Europe, which was already ‘based on the truncheon and the machine-gun’.<sup>32</sup> City bombing was, in other words, merely a component of total war and therefore created the same form of strategic dilemma that had loomed over his debate with the pacifists. To renounce bombing was to risk leaving Europe at the mercy of Hitler’s tyranny; to continue with it was to risk the very values one was seeking to defend. There was no self-evidently good choice here.

Orwell attracted heartfelt criticism for his public differences with Brittain and the following month he was once more in the pages of *Tribune*, noting receipt of various letters on the subject – ‘some of

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

<sup>31</sup> Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932–45 and the American Cover-Up* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> ‘As I please’, 25, p. 196.

them quite violent ones' he cheerfully admitted.<sup>33</sup> Here his object was to renew his dispassionate defence of area bombing, and he steadfastly refused to acknowledge any significance in the distinction his detractors insisted on drawing between killing men and women, denouncing it as 'sheer sentimentality'. It was also, he now argued, a distinction that was actually harmful to the societies that observed it. During the previous war millions of young men had died unmarried, with the result that their nations were also deprived of the children they never fathered. Focusing warfare on the killing of young men was, therefore, rather more detrimental to society than making everyone a target. As such, Orwell concluded that had the present war 'been conducted ... with flying bombs, rockets and other long-range weapons which kill old and young, healthy and unhealthy, male and female impartially, it would probably have damaged European civilisation somewhat less than it did'.<sup>34</sup>

Orwell returned once again to the subject of area bombing towards the end of the war, at which point he was working in Europe as a correspondent for the *Observer*. The job had given him an opportunity to observe the effects of the fighting at first hand, and he now confessed astonishment at the extent of the damage inflicted on German cities, which was far in excess of anything the *Luftwaffe* had previously achieved against Britain. 'To walk through the ruined cities of Germany', he declared, 'is to feel an actual doubt about the continuity of civilisation.' If anything, however, the experience seems to have strengthened Orwell's convictions. He pointed out that the destruction was actually at its most complete in the wake of the ground fighting, and steadfastly maintained that the key problem was not so much bombing as the 'frightful destructiveness of modern war' in general.

Bombing is not especially inhumane. War itself is inhumane, and the bombing plane, which is used to paralyse industry and transport rather than to kill human beings, is a relatively civilised weapon. 'Normal' or 'legitimate' warfare is just as destructive of inanimate objects, and enormously more so of human lives ... Moreover, a bomb kills a casual cross-section of the population, whereas the men killed in battle are exactly the ones that the community can least afford to lose.<sup>35</sup>

This latter comment reflects a further development of Orwell's position on the problems associated with restricting warfare to the killing of soldiers. In his view, the fit young men who had perished in battle by their tens of thousands fell into exactly that category of people who would be most valuable in the postwar reconstruction of Germany – a task that would subsequently be necessary if the stricken country were not to become a chronic burden on its vanquishers. Killing soldiers was, in other words, killing society's best bet for a stable and prosperous future. And callous as this argument may sound, it did in fact become an established part of the grim calculus underpinning postwar efforts to revive a shattered Europe. As Tony Judt would later observe: out the millions of refugees and displaced persons created by the war 'European states were interested in strong (male) manual workers [whereas] no-one wanted older people, orphans or single women with children.'<sup>36</sup>

These wartime controversies confront us with an aspect of Orwell's makeup that is very different from his trademark humanitarianism – which is his capacity for an austere version of consequentialism. Ends could on occasion go a long way towards justifying means. But whatever else

<sup>33</sup> 'As I please', 33, *Tribune* (14 July 1944), CWGO XVI, 2507, p. 284.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>35</sup> 'Future of a ruined Germany: Rural slum cannot help Europe', *The Observer* (8 April 1945), CWGO XVII, 2654, pp. 121–3.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 31.

we might make of his attitudes towards pacifism and city bombing, the relevant point here is that they stemmed from a determination to think matters through to a logical conclusion, even though this might go against the grain of one's emotional commitments. For Orwell politics is a grim business of compromise and grey choices, which we cannot avoid. Politics, moreover, implies the possibility of war along with a requirement to make difficult decisions about the use of force. Intuition is no sure guide in this regard. Rather, the issues demand working through as systematically as possible. This may lead us to uncomfortable conclusions. Nevertheless for Orwell this process is both instrumentally and morally superior – by dint of its ability to deliver superior outcomes – to the alternative of being led hither and thither by one's emotions.

## The liberal imagination

Orwell did not limit his criticism to those he believed were allowing emotion to cloud their reasoning on strategic matters. Although rational deliberation might lie at the heart of effective strategy, he also warned against assuming that the enemy reasoned in accordance with one's own scale of values, or even that he was rational at all. It is not the case that one's own scrupulously interrogated position on any question of war will necessarily find its reflection in the adversary's mind. Orwell's principal target in this regard were intellectuals whose parochial brand of liberalism blinded them to the atavistic allure of nationalism elsewhere in the world, and to the power available to those who knew how to incite and channel it in accordance with their own purposes. 'One of the great weaknesses of British and American political thought during the past decade', he wrote in 1941

has been that people who have lived all their lives in democratic or quasi-democratic countries find it very difficult to imagine the totalitarian atmosphere and tend to translate all that happens abroad into terms of their own experience. This tendency has vitiated most of what has been written about the U.S.S.R., about the Spanish Civil War, even about Nazism.<sup>37</sup>

Preserved from the traumas of defeat and revolution consequent on the last war, many liberals 'assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover maximising access to these goods was, they concluded, what everyone else wished for out of life. For Orwell, however, hedonic assumptions of this kind obscured the unpalatable fact that nationalist particularism, and all it entailed, was actually what validated existence for many people living in unhappier places than the British Isles.<sup>39</sup> Liberal intellectuals, in other words, were prone to lacking the political imagination necessary to empathise with the broader emotional climate of their times.

It was such failings, claimed Orwell, that led so many to underestimate the danger posed by fascism – and this despite the fact that its very existence demonstrated a popular 'desire to avoid a too-rational and too comfortable world'.<sup>40</sup> In his own analysis of Hitler's psychology, Orwell contended that part

<sup>37</sup> 'Review of *Men and Politics* by Louis Fischer', *Now and Then* (Christmas 1941), *CWGO XIII*, 908, p. 101. See also, 'Review of *Arrival and Departure* by Arthur Koestler; *Jordan's Tunis Diary* by Philip Jordan', *Manchester Evening News* (9 December 1943), *CWGO XVI*, 2389, pp. 19–22.

<sup>38</sup> 'Review of *Mein Kampf*, by Adolph Hitler, unabridged translation', *New English Weekly* (21 March 1940), *CWGO XII*, 602, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> 'Review of *Journey Through The War Mind* by C. E. M. Joad; *A Psychologist's Wartime Diary* by Anthony Weymouth; *America Expects* by Hector Bolitho'. See also 'Review of *The Adventures of the Young Soldier in Search of the Better World* by C. E. M. Joad', p. 292.

<sup>40</sup> 'Can socialists be happy?', *Tribune* (24 December 1943), *CWGO XVI*, 2397, p. 40.

of the dictator's power lay in his appreciation of exactly this point. Most people will not be inspired by the promise of an easier and more reasonable life. They may wish for such things, but sometimes they also 'want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades ... Fascism and Nazism are psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life.'<sup>41</sup> And liberals who did not appreciate this point were in no position to offer practicable strategic solutions to the threats Britain faced.

## H. G. Wells

One of Orwell's principal targets in this regard was H. G. Wells. Orwell considered Wells an important public intellectual, going so far as to label him the most influential English-language novelist of the time, to the extent that '[t]hinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells's own creation.'<sup>42</sup> Having said that, he also considered Wells's political outlook to be dangerously out of step with the modern world. To be sure, his unyielding faith in scientific reason as a cure-all for the human condition had made him a far-sighted prophet by the standards of the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a failure to change with the times had left him ill equipped to understand the political complexion of a darker era that involved explicitly articulated efforts to destroy the Enlightenment's legacy. Thus although Orwell would certainly have agreed with Wells that war 'without clearly stated war aims is a form of epilepsy [the] sabotage of the end by the means', he profoundly disagreed with him on the strategic specifics of 1941.<sup>43</sup>

In the summer of that year Wells published a collection of widely syndicated newspaper articles in book form. His *Guide to the New World* formed part of his running commentary on the war, about which he remained optimistic as far as British prospects were concerned.<sup>44</sup> Germany, Wells argued, had over-extended itself the previous year whilst Britain's military capacity could now be expected to increase as a result of incipient US aid. The fall of France had been due as much to French weakness as German strength, and although the *Luftwaffe* remained a menace to British cities this was something that could be addressed in due course by a strengthening Royal Air Force. In fact, Wells considered that the tide of war was now turning against Hitler and that Britain could look forward to victory in the near future. Lately, however, he had detected a sinister whiff of conspiracy in the air. Churchill was warning that the national outpouring of 'blood and tears' would last into 1942, whilst British military 'experts' were awaiting a renewed German offensive with something approaching trepidation. 'In their imaginations', Wells maintained, the German military

is perfect in its equipment and invincible in discipline. Sometimes it is to strike a decisive 'blow' through Spain and North Africa and on, or march through the Balkans, march from the Danube to Ankara, to Persia, to India, or 'crush Russia', or 'pour over the Brenner into Italy'.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> 'Review of *Mein Kampf*', p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> 'Review of *A Hero of Our Own Times* by Mikhail Yurevich Lermontoff; *Priest Island* by E. L. Grant Wilson; *Film Stories* by H. G. Wells', *Tribune* (21 June 1940), CWGO XII, 640, p. 191. See also, 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', *Horizon* (August 1941), CWGO XII, 837, pp. 539–40.

<sup>43</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Common Sense of War and Peace: World Revolution or War Unending* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> H. G. Wells, *Guide to the New World: A Handbook of Constructive World Revolution* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1941).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–2, 32.

According to Wells this persistent defeatism was political rather than military in origin; it was the propaganda of a ruling elite who sensed an existential threat in a British *victory* over Germany, and wished to avert it. As such it was an interpretation of matters grounded in a particularly Wellsian view of humanity's fundamental predicament, and of how best to address it. Since the late nineteenth century, Wells had been advocating the establishment of a world state committed to the government of humankind as a whole.<sup>46</sup> Only through such a revolutionary transformation, he believed, could humanity emancipate itself from the dead hand of ignorance and tradition, and enter a new era characterised by the rational pursuit of social justice. And now, in the spring of 1941, he sensed that the moment for decisive action had arrived, that British resistance to Hitler represented a revolutionary opportunity – if only people could be made to see it.

For Wells the measures necessary to exploit the situation were both military and political in character. Britain must pressurise Germany by means of a powerful military and economic counter-offensive. The object was not to destroy the Nazi war machine outright, but to convince the people of Germany and occupied Europe that Hitler could never win the war. Meanwhile there should be a clear articulation of political goals designed to inspire popular resistance against Nazism. Britain, he contended, must claim for itself the role of vanguard in the world revolution; by its own actions it must seek to demonstrate that the defeat of Nazism was the first step in the creation of a better world for all.<sup>47</sup> Hence the subtitle of his 1941 collection: *A Handbook of Constructive World Revolution*. None of this looked likely to happen any time soon however. Not only was the official mood one of pessimism in relation to military matters, but no public articulation of war aims was forthcoming. This encouraged Wells to conclude that he had uncovered a conspiracy. British passivity, he argued, was symptomatic of establishment hostility towards his postwar vision of world revolution, rather than a dispassionate analysis of military factors. Those who pronounced themselves fearful of a renewed German offensive were the very people who had most to lose from the emergence of a new world order. Their ploy was to reach an accommodation with Hitler – a 'propitiary peace' – as soon as possible, so as to stop the war and preserve existing political arrangements along with their own privileged positions therein. The problem here was that a compromise peace would be acceptable to the British people only if they were persuaded that continuing the war would expose them to a new and terrible series of German blows. Hitler's military strength therefore had to be greatly exaggerated, which explained the spate of publically articulated defeatism that Wells believed he had detected.<sup>48</sup>

Orwell responded to this rather convoluted thesis with his broadside of an essay, 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', which appeared in the August 1941 issue of *Horizon*. According to John Partington, it was destined to inflict lasting damage on Wells's status as a political thinker.<sup>49</sup> The basis of Orwell's critique was that Wells had failed to move with the times; he remained too much the nineteenth-century liberal to comprehend the nature of the powerful social forces that fascism had lately succeeded in tapping. Hitler might be a 'criminal lunatic', but for 'his sake a great nation has been willing to overwork itself for six years and then to fight for two years more'. This was because Hitler

<sup>46</sup> Wells wrote about this matter at length in his *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866), Volume II* (London: Victor Gollancz/Cresset Press, 1934), pp. 643–827. See also Edward Mead Earle, 'H. G. Wells, British patriot in search of a world state', *World Politics*, 2 (1950), pp. 181–208.

<sup>47</sup> Wells, *Guide to the New World*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–2.

<sup>49</sup> 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', *Horizon* (August 1941), CWGO XII, 837, pp. 536–41; John S. Partington, 'The pen as sword: George Orwell, H. G. Wells and journalistic parricide', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39:1 (2004), p. 45.

understood something that Wells did not: 'that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity.' Moreover, Hitler had demonstrated that the Wellsian 'equation of science with common sense does not really hold good', that technical progress and reactionary war mongering were not mutually exclusive activities. Far from recasting politics in accordance with its own rational foundations, therefore, science was now being harnessed to the nihilistic creed of Nazism with potentially terrible consequences.<sup>50</sup>

To set against these forces Wells had only his rather abstract vision of a world state, in pursuit of which 'hardly a human creature is willing to shed a pint of blood' because it was really not the kind of project capable of galvanising an emotional response.<sup>51</sup> 'When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic', claimed Orwell, 'and leaders who offer blood, toil, tears and sweat always get more out of their followers than those who offer safety and a good time.'<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, Wells's prescriptions provided no sound basis for British strategy. German morale would not be seriously undermined by military action designed merely to demonstrate that Hitler could not win the war. Nor would a British declaration of 'constructive' revolutionary intent serve to incite mass resistance to the Nazis in Germany or occupied Europe. And just in case anyone believed that Hitler's military power was indeed on the wane, the summer months of 1941 had witnessed exactly that renewal of German offensive activity that Wells had insisted could not take place. In August it was barely necessary for Orwell to point out that

the German Army has overrun the Balkans and reconquered Cyrenaica, it can march through Turkey or Spain at such time as may suit it, and it has undertaken the invasion of Russia ... So much for the idea that the German army is a bogey, its equipment inadequate, its morale breaking down, etc., etc.<sup>53</sup>

Winning the war, concluded Orwell, required the destruction of Hitler's regime. An appeal to reason, as Wells understood this term, would gain no traction with Germany's leadership or its people. As such, Wells possessed no realistic solution to the problem of total war.

This was harsh criticism but, in relation to Wells's arguments, it was not unreasonable. The claim that humanity might unite under the banners of science and reason was simply unrealistic as a response to the Second World War, when the world was becoming increasingly divided by nationalism and ideological differences. It was Orwell's pessimistic vision of the future, with its power blocs and Cold War confrontation, which was more in tune with the new spirit of the age.

## Liddell Hart

Readers may be surprised to learn that Orwell's critique of Wells was endorsed by none other than Basil Liddell Hart. Throughout his extensive writings, Liddell Hart had always displayed a profound faith in the capacity of reason to solve problems of military strategy. One might, therefore, have

<sup>50</sup> 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', pp. 537, 539–40. Orwell had previously criticised Wells for 'his confusion of mechanical progress with justice, liberty and common decency', with reference to his 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. See 'Review of *A Hero of Our Own Times* by Mikhail Yurevich Lermontoff; *Priest Island* by E. L. Grant Wilson; *Film Stories* by H. G. Wells', p. 191.

<sup>51</sup> 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', p. 537.

<sup>52</sup> 'The art of Donald McGill', *Horizon* (September 1941), *GWGO XIII*, pp. 23–30. Elsewhere Orwell developed the idea that Wellsian Utopias would actually be rather boring places in which to live, in the sense of being free from emotional highs and lows. 'Can socialists be happy?', pp. 39–43.

<sup>53</sup> 'Wells, Hitler and the world state', p. 537.

expected them to be natural allies, and Wells did indeed describe Liddell Hart as that ‘ablest authority upon the military outlook’.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, in a letter to *Horizon’s* editor, Cyril Connolly, Liddell Hart pronounced Orwell’s essay ‘good criticism, and all the better for being so well-balanced on the whole’.<sup>55</sup> He did not contact Orwell himself on the matter, however, and another year went by before they struck up a correspondence and resolved to meet.<sup>56</sup>

The meeting evidently took place at the Park Lane Hotel in September 1942, with Osbert Sitwell in attendance.<sup>57</sup> It did not go entirely smoothly. Orwell was unimpressed by what he perceived to be Liddell Hart’s lukewarm commitment to winning the war, and they argued about the merits of bombing German cities. In his diary entry for the following day, Orwell recorded his impressions of Liddell Hart in no uncertain terms.

Very defeatist and even, in my judgement, somewhat inclined to be pro-German subjectively. In a great stew about the barbarism of bombing Lübeck. Considered that during the wars of recent centuries the British have the worst record of all for atrocities and destructiveness. Although, of course, strongly opposed to the Second Front, also anxious for us to call off the bombing. There is no point in doing it, as it can achieve nothing and does not weaken Germany. On the other hand we ought not to have started bombing in the first place (he stuck to it that it was we who started it), as it merely brought heavier reprisals on ourselves.<sup>58</sup>

The Park Lane encounter also stuck in Liddell Hart’s mind long after it had taken place. As late as 1968 he was writing with evident feeling on the matter to Frederick Warburg who had recently published a four-volume collection of Orwell’s writings.<sup>59</sup> The collection included Orwell’s account of their meeting (with the pro-German comments happily redacted) and Liddell Hart yet remained keen to put his own gloss on events.

Orwell’s diary note ... about his meeting with me and Osbert Sitwell of the previous day, showed how dimly he understood what we were both saying about the British bombing campaign, and how he misunderstood that when I was then expressing myself as ‘opposed to the Second Front’, I was speaking of the near future – for a landing in France in 1942 would have been suicidal, one in 1943 very dubious, and even when it was eventually launched in June, 1944 it was ‘touch and go’ for several days before we succeeded in establishing an adequate bridgehead ...<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Wells, *Guide to the New World*, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London (LHCMA) LH 1/557, letter from Liddell Hart to Cyril Connolly, 27 August 1941.

<sup>56</sup> LHCMA 1/577/1, letter from Liddell Hart to George Orwell, 8 August 1942; ‘To B. H. Liddell Hart’ (12 August 1942), *CWGO XIII*, 1379, pp. 471–2; LHCMA LH 1/557/3, letter from Liddell Hart to George Orwell, 16 August 1942.

<sup>57</sup> Liddell Hart mentions the Park Lane in a subsequent letter to Orwell, with ‘on 20 Sept’ scribbled in the margin. LHCMA LH 1/557/6, letter from Liddell Hart to George Orwell, 17 October 1942.

<sup>58</sup> ‘War-time Diary’ (21 September 1942), *CWGO XX*, 1506, p. 50. The Royal Air Force had attacked the port of Lübeck on the night of 28/29 March that year, dropping large numbers of incendiary bombs in a bid to inflict widespread urban damage. Around 60 per cent of the city’s buildings were damaged and 312 people killed – the highest number of bomb deaths in Germany to that date. Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 289.

<sup>59</sup> Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 volumes (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968).

<sup>60</sup> LHCMA LH 1/557/10, letter from Liddell Hart to Frederick Warburg (Secker [Martin] & Warburg Ltd), 3 December 1968. For his part Sitwell did not bother to record any impression of the meeting, although he was

In at least one important respect Orwell had matters wrong: Liddell Hart was not subjectively pro-German. He did, however, deplore the idea of total war as a monstrous waste of people and resources, and a threat to Britain's liberal ideals. He had long worried that another European war would see Britain once again raising a large conscript army whose bloody fate would be to reprise the Somme and Passchendaele offensives. When Britain returned to conscription on the eve of the Second World War he regarded it as a self-defeating move, because the sacrifices entailed were likely to erode popular support for the war. Sustaining the national war effort over the long term, he believed, actually required that peacetime conditions be preserved as far as practicable so as not to push people too quickly beyond the bounds of their endurance. Moreover, whilst state compulsion had not yet precipitated a British dictatorship, it had laid foundations that might quickly be built on should the existing government be replaced by one less concerned to preserve democratic institutions. Britain was, therefore, playing fast and loose with

the cardinal principle of a free community: that there should be no restriction on individual freedom save where this is used for active interference with others' freedom. Our tradition of individual freedom is the slow-ripening fruit of centuries of effort. To surrender it within after fighting to defend it against dangers without would be a supremely ironical turn of our history.<sup>61</sup>

It was in this spirit that Liddell Hart entertained doubts about returning to the European continent in force. Likewise he believed that city bombing was a pointless and counter-productive exercise, prompted by the faulty logic of total war. It actually did nothing to hinder the German war effort, and therefore succeeded only in inciting retaliation in kind. As such, bombing multiplied human suffering to no good end. Ultimately, therefore, if Liddell Hart sometimes seemed to be accusing his own side of provoking Hitler, it was not out of sympathy for the Nazi regime but out of frustration with what he perceived to be his own side's recklessness.<sup>62</sup>

These arguments had much in common with the pacifist critique of total war, just as they shared the concerns of those opposed to city bombing. But Liddell Hart was not a pacifist; he entertained grave reservations about the political utility of force but he never entirely rejected it. Much of his thinking was, in fact, directed towards identifying a liberal middle way between whole-hearted commitment to war on the one hand, and whole-hearted rejection of it on the other.<sup>63</sup> And it was on the feasibility of this middle way that Liddell Hart and Orwell would have a second major difference of opinion.

In the wake of their meeting, Liddell Hart sent Orwell a copy of his book, *The British Way in Warfare*. Originally published ten years previously, it had recently been reissued by Penguin in revised form.<sup>64</sup> This was Liddell Hart seeking to continue their previous argument by other means. *The British Way* contains as its first chapter a short essay on what its author termed the 'historic strategy of Britain'.

certainly against the area bombing of German cities as part of the 'bomb-auction which is now upon us. Tit for Tat, pinch for smack, kick for pinch; "Blitz on London!", "R.A.F. bomb Berlin!" ... so the captions run.' *Left Hand, Right Hand! An Autobiography by Osbert Sitwell*, Volume 1: *The Cruel Month* (London: Macmillan, 1947), p. vii.

<sup>61</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1944), pp. 24–9.

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed account of Liddell Hart's opposition to Britain's total-war strategy see Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of His Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 1977), pp. 119–63.

<sup>63</sup> John Stone, *Military Strategy: The Politics and Technique of War* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 70–3.

<sup>64</sup> Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932). The book was revised and republished as *When Britain Goes to War: Adaptability and Mobility* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935), and as *The British Way in Warfare: Adaptability and Mobility* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1942).

From the sixteenth century down to the First World War, he argued, Britain had pursued a strategy of 'limited war'. This involved employing her sea power against the economic foundations of an adversary's war effort, by choking off its maritime commerce and sweeping up its overseas colonies. When conducted in concert with suitable Continental allies, the strategy permitted Britain to exercise a powerful influence over European politics without having to put a large army into the field. An expeditionary force might upon occasion be landed by the navy at some weak spot on an enemy's periphery, causing disruption out of all proportion to its size. But this was the limit of British ambitions as far as land warfare was concerned. Economy of effort was the key principle in this latter regard.

In Liddell Hart's view, it was Britain's departure from this traditional strategy, in favour of raising a mass army for major operations on the Continent, which led to the terrible casualties and ruinous costs of the First World War. Had Britain maintained its maritime posture, it would not have suffered such crippling losses. It would have been able to blockade Germany whilst mounting diversionary raids that reduced pressure on the French army. It might also have been possible to open better supply lines to Russia, thereby ameliorating the latter's chronic logistical problems. If German resistance had not altogether collapsed in consequence, a negotiated settlement would have permitted an end to the war at far lower cost than was actually the case. As such, *The British Way* was part of Liddell Hart's campaign to resurrect this maritime strategy, thereby limiting Britain's commitment to any future war in Europe. He revised successive editions of the book in order to accommodate the changing circumstances of the war, but the central message remained the same: Britain should avoid the dangers of total war by adopting a limited, maritime strategy.

In due course, Orwell produced a review of the book for *The New Statesman and Nation*. He had evidently read Liddell Hart's opening chapter with care, and considered it an important contribution to the debate on the future direction of British strategy. He therefore chose to engage with it in some detail. For one thing, Orwell was sceptical about the effectiveness of a naval blockade under contemporary technical conditions. He considered that the mission had been made more difficult by the introduction of the marine mine, whilst Germany's ability to manufacture substitutes for raw materials it could no longer import also undermined the blockade's effectiveness. The real problem with Liddell Hart's prescriptions, however, was more in the political line. More specifically it lay in his

unwillingness to admit that war has changed its character. 'Limited Aims' strategy implies that your enemy is very much the same kind of person as yourself; you want to get the better of him, but it is not necessary for your safety to annihilate him or even to interfere with his internal politics.

Whilst these conditions had been a feature of the eighteenth-century outlook, the ideologically opposed belligerents of the mid-twentieth century took a decidedly different view of each other. 'As Mussolini has truly said', continued Orwell, 'democracy and totalitarianism cannot exist side by side.' It followed from this that the range of Britain's strategic options were far narrower than Liddell Hart evidently realised. 'Our survival', Orwell concluded, 'depends on the destruction of the present German political system, which implies the destruction of the German army.'<sup>65</sup> If Liddell Hart could not credit this it was because of his earnest desire to avoid another Passchendaele, which was blinkering his judgement.

Orwell's review elicited both a private letter and a published response from Liddell Hart. In the first of these he was concerned to explain that his discussion of strategy in *The British Way* had originally

<sup>65</sup> 'Review of *The British Way in Warfare* by B. H. Liddell Hart', *The New Statesman and Nation* (21 November 1942), CWGO XIV, 1670, p. 189.

been written in 1931 as a reaction to events during the First World War. As such it had never been intended as a prescription for future action in relation to Germany. It was only when he had received the proofs of the new Penguin edition that he had spotted the potential for confusion, by which point he was no longer able to make significant revisions.<sup>66</sup> In his published response Liddell Hart suggested that technical developments did indeed necessitate some revisions to the strategy of limited war, but that Orwell was nevertheless wrong to argue for its wholesale abandonment in the face of an ideological opponent. Indeed the strategy had first been developed during the sixteenth century in response to the threat posed by Catholic Spain.<sup>67</sup> If it worked in the context of the pronounced confessional differences of those days, he seems to have been suggesting, it ought to work in the context of contemporary ideological differences.

The problem here was Liddell Hart's inability to comprehend just how different Hitler was from Britain's previous enemies. He could never quite bring himself to admit that Nazi Germany was under the spell of a fanatic whose scale of values was not remotely congruent with his own. His sense of the matter was that all aggressors are carefully calculating individuals seeking to gain something from war. Thus they can be induced to seek peace so long as these gains are denied them, and they are not confronted with the prospect of losing something important in the process. He therefore believed it strategically important to guard against the error of treating the latest enemy as a departure from this pattern.

It is a recurrent illusion of history that the enemy of the time is essentially different in the sense of being more evil, than any in the past. We, for example, felt that conviction when fighting Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when fighting the France of Louis XIV early in the eighteenth century, when fighting Revolutionary France at the end of that century, and also when fighting Napoleonic France in the early nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup>

That Orwell's grasp of the political and strategic situation confronting Britain was sounder than Liddell Hart's hardly needs bringing out. It was Orwell who correctly perceived the 'rigidity' of Hitler's mind – his determination to achieve the goal of a transcendent Germany that he had articulated in *Mein Kampf*, and the consistency of his actions in pursuit of it. Hitler's was 'the fixed vision of a monomaniac; and not likely to be much affected by the temporary manoeuvres of power politics.'<sup>69</sup> He was not, in other words, somebody who could be coerced into passivity by a British strategy predicated merely on generating heavy military costs for his intransigence. He would either lead Germany to victory over its enemies, or see it destroyed in the attempt. Indeed Hitler's own explanation for his ultimate downfall reflected just such a mind-set. His mistake, he believed, was not his insistence on war so much as his failure to start it in 1938 when circumstances had been more favourable to Germany than they would subsequently be.<sup>70</sup> Such an attitude was not one that Liddell Hart could ever really grasp.

### **Conclusion: a sense of reality**

As we have seen, Orwell's views on the strategic conduct of the Second World War stemmed partly from his determination to uphold the claims of reason in the face of unproblematised sentiment.

<sup>66</sup> LHCMA LH 1/557/7, letter from Liddell Hart to George Orwell, 8 December 1942.

<sup>67</sup> LHCMA LH 1/557/8, B. H. Liddell Hart, 'The British way', *New Statesman and Nation* (19 December 1942), cutting.

<sup>68</sup> Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?*, pp. 50–1.

<sup>69</sup> 'Review of *Mein Kampf*', p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 37–8.

His position on pacifism and city bombing alike resulted from his efforts to evaluate these matters in a rigorously intellectual manner. Because there is a necessary relationship between politics and force, pacifism cannot be a defensible choice for citizens of a state at war. If one soberly considers the demographics of bombing casualties, and compares them across different forms of warfare, air raids emerge as relatively rational and humane.

However, Orwell was also perceptive enough to appreciate that liberal-hedonic calculations were not, in themselves, a sure guide to strategy. Much also depended on the character of the opposition, along with the values they brought to the struggle. And in this respect it was Orwell's shrewd grasp of the wider political mood of his day, his feel for the general course of world events and what they entailed for Britain, which made his strategic views so perspicacious. Orwell himself articulated this point in one of his diary entries for 1940.

Stephen Spender said to me recently, 'Don't you feel that any time during the past ten years you have been able to foretell events better than, say, the Cabinet?' I had to agree to this. Partly it is a question of not being blinded by class interests, etc. ... But where I feel that people like us understand the situation better than so-called experts is not in any power to foretell specific events, but in the power to grasp what *kind* of world we are living in.<sup>71</sup>

Experts in military matters had their place, but their specialisation meant they were 'generally right on the minor points and wrong on the major ones'.<sup>72</sup> Consequently

a poet or philosopher who does not even know how to load a .303 rifle, but who does at least know something about the nature of Fascism, is a better guide to grand strategy than an elderly soldier who has given his life to the study of war but who, politically and philosophically, has learnt nothing since 1918.<sup>73</sup>

Orwell, in other words, possessed what Isaiah Berlin famously described as 'a sense of reality' – a capacity to see beyond what was most obvious and generic about the times in which he lived, to glimpse something of its more fundamental and unique (if sometimes ineffable) qualities, and to appreciate what these latter qualities meant for one's own freedom of action at a political and strategic level.<sup>74</sup> It was just this capacity that equipped him to appreciate what it was necessary to do, and reasonable to risk, in response to the threat posed by Hitler's Germany. Orwell's synoptic vision of the world, with its rising tide of totalitarianism whose ways he intuited so thoroughly, alerted him to the necessity of extreme efforts. Pacifists might warn that to fight Hitler was to become him, and opponents of city bombing might argue that it risked destroying the moral foundations of any society that stooped to such practices. But Orwell was prepared to take such risks because he perceived there was no real alternative. To accommodate Fascism was to acquiesce in the terrible prospect of a night without end in Europe, and quite possibly the world at large. One must therefore fight as fiercely as possible. Moreover, he was willing to bet (although not certain) that the peculiar nature of British society – its liberal insularity – would shield it from the worst consequences of its own actions in this regard, and that the excesses of wartime would not carry over into the peace.

<sup>71</sup> 'War-time Diary' (8 June 1940), CWGO XII, 637, p. 182, emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> 'Review of *Armies of Freeman* by Tom Wintringham', *The New Statesman and Nation* (14 December 1940), CWGO XII, 721, p. 306.

<sup>73</sup> 'Review of *Allenby, a Study in Greatness* by General Sir Archibald Wavell, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.C.', *Horizon* (December 1940), CWGO XII, 712, p. 293.

<sup>74</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The sense of reality', *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp. 1–39.

Unfortunately the same liberal reasonableness, which flourished in the benign environment of insular Britain, and which evidently inoculated its people against European political pathologies, also left them innocent of the vast reservoirs of popular energy that nationalistic demagogues might mobilise for their own dark purposes. This was the problem underlying the strategic prescriptions of Wells and Liddell Hart. The pair of them were too English in their world view; they were willing to fight Germany but not to fight hard enough. They could not credit the atavistic values that Hitler had stirred up in the German people. Consequently their advocacy of coercive strategies designed to separate the people from their *Führer*, or to manipulate his perception of risk, would not work. The war had to be fought with a view to destroying Nazism, and this would involve an unstinting military effort on Britain's part.

As such, Orwell's views on strategy reflect his broader political concerns of the 1940s. They recapitulate his desire to dispense with misplaced idealism about political matters, without wholly acquiescing in the fashionable realism he so disdained, and which he considered the road to totalitarianism. To the extent that his strategic prescriptions succeeded in navigating a path between these two extremes, it was because he could see the world as it was rather than how others might want it to be. To borrow a distinction drawn by Ian Hall, Orwell's position was realistic rather than realist.<sup>75</sup>

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## Biographical information

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<sup>75</sup> Hall, A "shallow piece of naughtiness", p. 215.