

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### *War and Forgetfulness*

In the contemporary United States, as in most modern societies, collective memory is always under construction. The contributors to the project are academics, journalists, politicians, business executives, media professionals, and other public figures who have access to institutions with the power to disseminate ideas about the past. They create narratives that purport to explain how we became who we are. This requires selective remembering and systematic forgetting.

The process is especially apparent in what have become the official narratives of American wars. Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* celebrates the men who waded ashore at Omaha Beach for saving the world from fascism, while ignoring the equally heroic and arguably more decisive role played by Soviet soldiers and citizens at Stalingrad. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's recent PBS series presents the American invasion of Vietnam as a well-intentioned catastrophe from which contemporary policymakers can apparently learn nothing—no need for caution using force in a foreign land whose customs and traditions are opaque to us; no need for hesitation before trying to thwart a popular insurgency aimed at unifying a nation. Burns and Novick acknowledge the antiwar sentiment provoked within the military by the inanity and barbarity of American strategy, but they trivialize and mostly ignore the civilian antiwar movement—which the historian Christian Appy has rightly called “the most diverse and vibrant peace movement in American history.” One would never know, from the Burns and Novick series, that the antiwar movement was not just a bunch of college kids concerned to save their own skins (though that was a perfectly good reason to oppose a war no one could adequately justify). We hear nothing from the filmmakers about the millions of ethically serious people of all ages, as well as ethnic and economic backgrounds, who resisted the war on grounds of moral principle and reasoned argument.

The disappearance of peace movements from contemporary collective memory is not confined to mainstream mythmaking; it is

common on the Left as well. The social activists Frances Fox Piven and Lorraine C. Minnitte, writing in the democratic socialist magazine *In These Times*, strive to inspire contemporary political organizers by invoking “the great and transformational movements of the past”—asserting that “the radical Democrats of the Revolutionary War era, or the abolitionists of the nineteenth century, or the twentieth-century labor movement, or the black freedom movement, or the women’s movement, or the movements for personal rights included under the LBGTQ acronym—all scored their successes because they activated the elementary and fundamental power of ordinary people.” Fine words, but what is most striking about this list is that there is no mention of either the movement to end the Vietnam War or the nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s, which collaborated with the European movement for nuclear disarmament in promoting a halt to the nuclear arms race.

The halt, alas, was only temporary. President George W. Bush unilaterally withdrew from the antiballistic missile treaty in 2002 and began to build missile defense systems, which nuclear strategists agree would be useless against a massive first strike; the defense systems, in effect, were offensive weapons, meant to be deployed against an enemy whose ability to retaliate had already been disabled by a US attack. Bush’s move marked a shift in nuclear strategy from deterrence to “war-fighting”—a revival of the notion that nuclear weapons could actually be used as if they were conventional. Since this momentous but largely unnoticed strategic shift, Presidents Obama and Trump have committed themselves to a trillion dollar “modernization” of the US nuclear arsenal, and Vladimir Putin—spurred on, no doubt, by the NATO missile defense systems now arrayed along his Western border—has vowed to keep pace. The renewal of the arms race, combined with the endless war in the Middle East provoked by American attempts at regime change, only makes the question more puzzling: why have peace movements disappeared from politics—and even from collective memory?

Memories that do survive are shaped by skeptical journalists, eager to sustain a stance of ironic detachment. They tend to dismiss

peace marchers as limp sentimentalists, linking arms and swaying to the strains of “Kumbaya.” But to judge peace movements by their occasionally vapid cultural style is to substitute caricature for history. As the essays in this issue by Eugene McCarraher and Samuel Moyn show, the American pacifist tradition includes many examples of unsentimental courage, from William Lloyd Garrison to Randolph Bourne and A. J. Muste. Indeed as Bourne himself observed, participation in the mobilization of thought demanded by modern war depends more on passive acquiescence than active commitment.

But resistance to war does not fall into the conventional categories of heroism that dominate our contemporary moment. So few people serve in the military these days that the experience has become mythologized; our “fallen heroes” have entered a Valhalla visited at every opportunity by unctuous politicians seeking to confirm their patriotic credentials. There are so few opportunities for conventional heroism, and so many people aspiring to it, that politicians repeatedly find themselves violating John Quincy Adams’s exemplary warning not to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. From Saddam Hussein to Osama Bin Laden, various monstrous figures have focused American longings for vicarious heroism in recent decades, reinforcing support for a “war on terror” that (as Dick Cheney predicted with grim satisfaction) will not end in our lifetime.

Vladimir Putin is the monster of the moment. He is the center of the strange frenzy that grips contemporary Washington—and the chief current reason why peace has become passé. “We are at war with Russia,” the actor Morgan Freeman announces portentously, in a video promoting a group of neoconservative ideologues called The Committee to Investigate Russia. In recent months more than one major publication has mischaracterized the Russians as “Soviets” and “Reds.” These slips are revealing—they suggest that behind the resurgent obsession with Russia is a longing to restore the atmosphere of moral clarity and heroic commitment that our official narratives claim characterized the Cold War.

The imaginary “war with Russia,” which of course could become a real one, was initially provoked by a supposed Russian hack into

the emails of the Democratic National Committee. So far the only evidence for this hack is a risibly vague and barely coherent “assessment” produced by a small number of “hand-picked” analysts from the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA (the last with only “moderate” confidence)—which in turn has helped to generate a full-blown investigation conducted by former FBI Director Robert Mueller. It is of course still possible that Mueller will produce evidence for the hack, but so far—after months of accusations and rumors—nothing substantive has surfaced.

Yet the speculative hacking charge has become the center of a new Washington orthodoxy. As befits a secular religion, it is supported not by evidence but by authoritative pronouncements from the Church Fathers of the national security state—James Clapper, John Brennan, James Comey, and Michael Hayden. Clapper perjured himself before Congress in 2013, when he denied that the NSA had “wittingly” spied on Americans. But religion exempts Church Fathers from standards imposed on ordinary people.

Clapper exuded a kind of theological authority, albeit inarticulately, in an interview with NBC's Chuck Todd in May 2017. Asked to comment on Jared Kushner's supposed meeting with the Russian ambassador during the 2016 campaign, Clapper said: “If you put that in context with everything else we knew the Russians were doing to interfere with the election. And just the historical practices of the Russians, who are typically, almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique. So we were concerned.” This opaque muddle cannot stand up to empirical scrutiny. But in Washington it was left unchallenged. At this historical moment, at least inside the beltway, Russians—and above all Putin—are uniquely, “almost genetically” diabolical.

Victoria de Grazia's essay-review of Jochen Hellbeck's important book on Stalingrad provides an indispensable alternative to the current demonization of all things Russian. Hellbeck and de Grazia demonstrate beyond a doubt that the Russian defense of Stalingrad was a pivotal moment in the defeat of the German army, as well as a decisive halt to German plans for expanding the Holocaust eastward,

sweeping up the “Slavic hordes” scattered across the steppes of Asia. They also reveal the archetypal narrative of Russian military history. The Wehrmacht penetrates deep into the Russian interior, then meets its match on the Volga River in the dead of winter, as bodies pile up like cordwood amid mounds of rubble. It is not a scene one can easily forget, and from it, the logic of modern Russian strategy emerges clearly: of course the Russians want friendly states along their western border; of course they worry about the installation of hostile regimes in Ukraine and Georgia, just as Americans would fret about similar developments in Canada and Mexico.

The point is not to excuse Putin’s policies but to understand the logic behind them. We need to remind ourselves of the fundamental principle of diplomacy: even enemies (if indeed Russia is one) can engage one another in pursuit of common interests—the avoidance of nuclear confrontation, for example—and not merely recoil in horror from engagement with an adversary they believe is evil. The determination to preserve moral purity by avoiding contaminating contact with “bad guys” is a prescription for disaster in foreign policy.

In the end, we need to cultivate a larger capacity for remembrance. If we forget the recent history of Russian suffering and struggle, if we ignore the collective Russian memory of resistance to a foreign invader bent on their enslavement, only then can we dismiss a great rival power with a complex history as just another corrupt rogue state. That would be an error of historic proportions. The struggle of man against power, Milan Kundera once said, is the struggle of memory against forgetting. Rarely has that reminder been more necessary than in contemporary Washington.

*Jackson Lears*  
*Furman’s Corner, New Jersey*  
*14 November 2017*