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Note/Nota

The Holocaust, the Twenty Million Soviet War Dead, the United Fruit Company, and Gabriel García Márquez

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I would like to begin with a now-famous reflection, first stated in poetic form by the German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, in the late 1940s.

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist—so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social

Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat, so I did nothing. Then came the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew—so I did little. Then, when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me.

This noble quote has been subjected to enormous distortions, as traced by historian Peter Novick in his masterful study, *The Holocaust in American Life*. In a revealing instance, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* moves the Jews, unhistorically, from fourth to first place. So the quote now starts out, “First they came for the Jews, etc... Then they came for the Communists, etc.” Similar modifications have been done by *Time* magazine, by Al Gore, and by a speaker at the 1992 GOP convention. These same sources, significantly, also omitted Niemöller’s conspicuous mention of Communists and Social Democrats. Not only that, but they added “the Catholics,” who in fact do NOT appear in Reverend Niemöller’s eloquent statement. Finally, publicity from the Holocaust Museum in D.C. preserves the order in Niemöller’s list—but omits Communists, starting out with Socialists instead.

These repeated omissions consciously deny a major fact of history: namely, that the very first concentration-camp victims of the Nazi dictatorship were the members and leaders of the German Communist Party, who were imprisoned *en masse* in Dachau. The arrests occurred just two months after the Nazi accession to power in 1933.

The omissions and modifications that I’ve listed—and there are some other truly outrageous ones—are only symptoms of the total exorcising of a much larger phenomenon: to wit, the fact that Nazism, both the movement and the regime, was as much anti-Marxist as it was anti-Semitic. The index to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, for instance, contains nearly as many entries for “Communism” and “Marxism” as it does for “Jews” and “anti-Semitism.” During each of the successive Nazi conquests across Europe, prominent

Communists and socialists were among the first arrested. And in Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi war in Russia, Soviet Communist Party functionaries were routinely subject to summary execution. For reasons many of us gathered here can infer, this vast history is not even hinted at in U.S. pop culture, in press retrospectives, or in American political discourse dealing with Nazism. Lots of high school and college courses in European history, I suspect, gloss it over, too.

In addition, the complementary fact that, throughout the 1930s, Western conservatives openly PRAISED Hitler for his anti-communism is all but exorcised from textbooks and popular histories as an inconvenient truth. As an example, Henry Luce, founder and president of *Time-Life*, proclaimed in 1934 that “the moral force of fascism ... may be the inspiration for the next general march of mankind.” Luce visited Nazi Germany in 1938 and glowed with pleasure at the regime, especially because it had “no ‘soak-the-rich’ ideology” and it had “suspended the class war.” Hitler’s Germany, Luce argued, was much “misunderstood,” and he showed even greater enthusiasm for General Franco’s uprising in Spain. The views of Henry Luce were not eccentric in conservative circles, but indeed typical. Such disturbing opinions, needless to say, have disappeared from mainstream writing about that past.

Here is another instance of willful historical amnesia mentioned in Peter Novick’s book. According to opinion polls, some ninety-seven per cent of Americans surveyed knew about the Holocaust—which is well and good. On the other hand, just forty-nine per cent proved to be aware that the Soviet Union was one of the Big Three Allies fighting Hitler. In other words, fifty-one per cent of the respondents did NOT know that Russia had been our ally in arms. When you think of it, that’s a startling gap in knowledge. After all, the Eastern front—with its battle line stretching from Leningrad in the north to Odessa on the Black Sea—was one of the biggest and bloodiest combat operations in recorded history.

The Soviet front, moreover, was where the Nazis suffered their first major reverses in the war. The advancing Wehrmacht was permanently stopped in its tracks outside Moscow; not before then had the Nazi war machine suffered a setback and been stalled. And the battle of Stalingrad, with its one million Russian dead, was the very first defeat of Hitler's Reich on the ground.

If more than one-half of the U.S. public are not even cognizant of the fact that Russia was our military ally, I would venture to speculate that only professional scholars, military history buffs, and some U.S. veterans well into their eighties are familiar with the details I've just cited. And maybe a fraction of one per cent has knowledge of the Russian war dead, which, as you all know, was between twenty and thirty million—the largest loss of life, in absolute numbers, in the conflict, and perhaps the highest casualty rate for a nation in any war.

I got a direct taste of this historical amnesia back in 1973, when I sent a letter to the editors of *The New York Times Magazine*. They had just run an article marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1948 Berlin Airlift. In my letter, I argued that the Soviets had good reason to be paranoid about the West and a re-armed Germany, given their twenty million dead from German weaponry in World War II. A few days later I got a phone call from a *Times* editor, a lady name Barbara Dubivsky. She needed to do some fact checking, she said. She'd wondered about my mention of twenty million Soviet war dead in my letter. Is that a typo for 2 million? she asked. No, I replied, it's the commonly accepted number. Well, it's a staggering figure, she noted in awe, and then she asked if I could provide a source. As it happened, I had on hand a book on Russia by Harrison Salisbury, the well-known *Times* correspondent. I cited the title and found the appropriate page, and she laughed nervously. She seemed satisfied. Still, my letter never ran. What's interesting, of course, is

that an editor at our newspaper of record did not know this signal fact, and was incredulous when she first saw it on a typewritten page.

Now, to shift the focus briefly, I have a question to ask of all of you: How many Americans died fighting Hitler? And I mean exclusively in the European theater, not in the Pacific. The figure, amazingly enough is fifty thousand, within the range of Vietnam. Most of the total U.S. dead, about four hundred thousand, were in the war against Japan. That figure of fifty thousand, I think you would agree, would not suffice for constructing a persuasive narrative of suffering and victimization. By contrast, most every European country, with hundreds of thousands or even millions dead by Nazi attack and occupation, has its shared narrative of victimization, suffering, and resistance for World War II. Even the Bundesrepublik Deutschland does, with the former concentration camp at Dachau serving as an official memorial to GERMAN victims of the regime, most of them political opponents from the churches and from the left, as James E. Young of U. Mass.-Amherst has noted. Getting back to these shores, the contrasting reality is that the Reich's armed forces were never able to attack U.S. soil—there was no corresponding Pearl Harbor event by the Luftwaffe. And somehow, to say “Fifty thousand Americans died to save the world from Nazism” lacks rhetorical persuasiveness.

I should like to suggest that, in this mighty land, the Holocaust has become a convenient stand-in for AMERICAN victims of Nazism. It helps inflate indirectly the number of U.S. dead. The unrelenting U.S. focus on the Holocaust, moreover, serves to obscure the murderous anti-Communism of the Nazis, and also to erase the vast Soviet role in the war. Peter Novick's book, let us recall, is entitled *The Holocaust in American Life*. The very phrase implies a special relationship, a presence that goes beyond the expected, the ordinary.

Shifting again, now to the United Fruit Company. From about nineteen hundred to nineteen seventy, this Boston-based firm controlled the production and distribution of bananas from Central America, Colombia, and Ecuador. It owned not only the plantations, but also the railways that moved the harvests, and the ships that transported the yellow bunches to El Norte, where United commanded more than forty per cent of all banana sales. In addition it controlled the governments. Any Latin American ruler who challenged United Fruit power would find himself in trouble. This happened in Guatemala in the fifties, when the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz nationalized the company's unused lands and substantially raised wages for banana workers. Through the intrigues of a CIA coup, the reformist regime was toppled in 1954, United's precious lands were restored, and more than three decades of bloody dictatorship followed, with at least one hundred thousand dead.

As most of you know, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez has in its culminating chapters the takeover of the town of Macondo by a nameless banana firm. In protest against harsh working conditions the banana workers go on strike. The company in turn calls in the military, and one evening the army shoots down three thousand workers gathered in a public square. The bodies are then loaded onto trains and eventually dumped into the ocean. The episodes are closely based on a real strike that took place in 1928, though the author raises the number of dead in order to fit the outsized proportions of his novel.

And now for the amnesia part. In the wake of the Macondo massacre, both government and company unleash a propaganda campaign in which they will assert, repeatedly and in every venue, that no slaughter took place, that the workers simply went home satisfied. Next morning, everybody tells returning labor leader José Arcadio Segundo—who had witnessed and survived the events—that

he is deluded, that there was no massacre. Subsequently only he and two other characters will cling to the terrible truth. It's one of the great portrayals in literature of mass political indoctrination and state-induced amnesia.

I teach García Márquez's novel almost every year. Occasionally a student will express puzzlement at Macondo's near-total amnesia about the mass slaughter. I then ask the class if they've ever heard of the Palmer Raids of 1919. No one has. Or about the 1914 massacre of two dozen mine workers at Ludlow, Colorado. Silence. Or about the attempted murder of visiting chaplain William Sloane Coffin in 1960 by three frat guys at our school, Williams College. Surprise from all. And then I inquire, "How many Russians died in World War II?" Usually no one knows, so they start guessing: half a million, one million, two million, and I egg them on higher with "More, more." When someone at last reaches twenty million, I say yes, and invariably there are gasps in the room. A student once remarked, "That's a hell of a lot of people." Finally I ask them why they had never been taught that amazing statistic. And right then and there, a class member will inevitably guess right, remarking, "Because the Russians are seen as the bad guys, and we're not supposed to sympathize with them." Or words to that effect. Williams students, I should say, are very bright.

To sum up: there exists in current U.S. culture a selective historical amnesia regarding Nazi Germany and World War II that is nothing short of astounding. And, in a way that rivals George Orwell's vivid image of the memory hole in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, García Márquez depicts the experience of large-scale, collective amnesia with a disturbing magic and humor. His famous book allows me to bring up such issues in the classroom. I've no idea how enduring my little history lesson has proved to be, but at least, for the first time, some less-than-informed American college students have

heard about the twenty million Russian war dead along with the actions of United Fruit. I can only hope it is not their last time.