

# Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization

By Nicholson Baker

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Bestselling author Nicholson Baker, recognized as one of the most dexterous and talented writers in America today, has created a compelling work of nonfiction bound to provoke discussion and controversy—a wide-ranging, astonishingly fresh perspective on the political and social landscape that gave rise to World War II.

*Human Smoke* delivers a closely textured, deeply moving indictment of the treasured myths that have romanticized much of the 1930s and '40s. Incorporating meticulous research and well-documented sources—including newspaper and magazine articles, radio speeches, memoirs, and diaries—the book juxtaposes hundreds of interrelated moments of decision, brutality, suffering, and mercy. Vivid glimpses of political leaders and their dissenters illuminate and examine the gradual, horrifying advance toward overt global war and Holocaust.

Praised by critics and readers alike for his exquisitely observant eye and deft, inimitable prose, Baker has assembled a narrative within *Human Smoke* that unfolds gracefully, tragically, and persuasively. This is an unforgettable book that makes a profound impact on our perceptions of historical events and mourns the unthinkable loss humanity has borne at its own hand.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

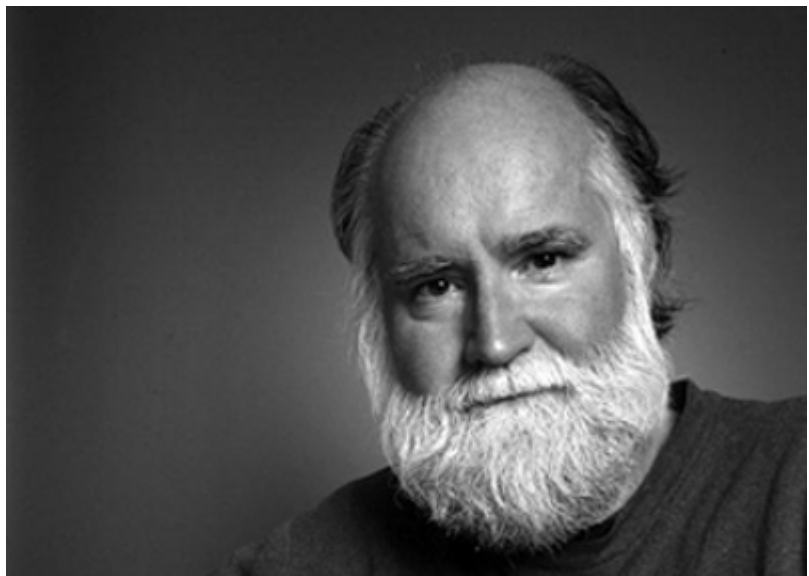
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### Questions for Nicholson Baker

**Amazon.com:** This is obviously a big departure for you, in both style and subject. How did the project come about, and how did it find this form?



**Baker:** I was writing a different book, on a smaller historical subject, when I stopped and asked: Do I understand World War Two? And of course I didn't. Also I'd been reading newspapers from the thirties and forties, and I knew that there were startling things in them.

In earlier books, I've looked closely at moments to see why they matter, and I've tried to rescue things, people, ideas from overfamiliarity. So in a way a book like this--which moves a loupe over some incidents along the way to a much-chronicled war--was a natural topic.

But yes, the style is a departure: it's very simple here out of respect for the hellishness of the story that I'm

trying to assemble, piece by piece.

**Amazon.com:** Why World War Two in particular?

**Baker:** Politicians constantly fondle a small, clean, paperweight version of this war, as if it provides them with moral clarity. We know that it was the most destructive five year period in history. It was destructive of human lives, and also of shelter, sleep, warmth, gentleness, mercy, political refuge, rational discussion, legal process, civil tradition, and public truth. Millions of people were gassed, shot, starved, and worked to death by a paranoid fanatic. The war's victims felt as if they'd come to the end of civilization.

But then we also say that because it turned out so badly, it was the one just, necessary war. We acknowledge that it was the worst catastrophe in the history of humanity--and yet it was "the good war." The Greatest Generation fought it, and a generation of people was wiped out.

If we don't try to understand this one war better--understand it not in the sense of coming up with elaborate mechanistic theories of causation, but understand it in the humbler sense of feeling our way through its enormity--then cartoon versions of what happened will continue to distort debates about the merits of all future wars.

**Amazon.com:** You largely kept your own opinions out of the text, except for the choices you made in what to include and a few editorial comments here and there, as well as your short Afterword at the end. It makes for a real tension between the neutral tone and the sense, at least on the part of this reader, that there are some passionate opinions behind it. What authorial role did you want to establish?

**Baker:** I found that my own cries of grief, amazement, or outrage--or of admiration at some quiet heroism--took away from the chaos of individual decisions that move events forward.

It helps sometimes to look at an action--compassionate, murderous, confessional, obfuscatory--out of context: as something that somebody did one day. The one-day-ness of history is often lost in traditional histories, because paragraphs and sections are organized by theme: attack, counterattack, argument, counterargument. That's a reasonable way to proceed, but I rejected it here for several reasons. First, because it fails to convey the hugeness and confusion of the time as it was experienced by people who lived through it. And, second, because I wanted the reader to have to form, and then jettison, and then re-form, explanations and mini-narratives along the way--as I did, and as did a newspaper reader in, say, New York City in September, 1941.

I think the pared-down, episodic style allowed me to offer some moments of truth that I wouldn't have been able to offer had I had uppermost in my mind the necessity of making transitions and smoothing out inconsistencies and sounding like me. I offer no organized argument: I want above all to fill the readers mind with an anguished sense of what happened.

**Amazon.com:** I was telling someone about your book and how it failed to convince me of what I took to be its thesis, and his response was, "Wow, you really made me want to read it." And that's my response too: if your point was to convince me that we shouldn't have fought World War II, then the book didn't work, but I'm still very glad I read it. But maybe that wasn't your point at all.

**Baker:** I'm really pleased that you responded that way. I didn't want to convince, but only to add enriching complication. Long ago I wrote an essay called "Changes of Mind" in which I tried to talk about how gradual and complicated a shift of conviction can be. I left overt opinionizing out of this book so that a reader can draw his or her own conclusions, folding in other knowledge.

There are many books about the war that I value highly even though I don't agree with the world-outlook of the people who wrote them. To take a major example: Churchill's own memoir-history is completely fascinating and revealing--and a great pleasure to read--although I happen to think that Churchill was himself a bad war leader.

There's no point in trying to use a book to replace one simple set of beliefs about World War Two with another simple set of beliefs. The war years are alive with contradictions and puzzles and shake-your-head-in-wonder moments. You're going to look at it in different ways on different days because you're going to have different moments uppermost in your mind.

On the other hand, I don't want to hide what I think. Here's what I am, more or less: I'm a non-religious pacifist who is sympathetic to Quaker notions of nonviolent resistance and of refuge and aid for those who need help. I find appealing what Christopher Isherwood called "the plain moral stand against killing." I don't expect people to look at things this way, necessarily--after all, it took me a while to get there myself. But I do hope that my book will offer some thought-provocations that anyone, of any ideological persuasion, will want to mull over.

**Amazon.com:** It's hard to believe there's something new to say about what may be the most written-about event in human history. What did you feel about approaching such a well-chronicled subject? What were you most surprised to find? What responses have you gotten from historians and other readers?

**Baker:** There were many surprises. For instance, I didn't expect Herbert Hoover, who argued for the lifting of the British blockade in order to get food to Jews in Polish ghettos and French concentration camps, to be a voice of reason and compassion. I didn't know that German propagandists used the phrase "iron curtain" before Churchill did. I didn't know that in 1940 the Royal Air Force tried to set fire to the forests of Germany. I didn't know how interested the United States government was in arming China. I didn't know how public was Japan's unhappiness with the American oil embargo. I didn't know that many of the people who worked hardest to help Jews escape Hitler were pacifists, not interventionists.

I've had interesting reactions from historians, who seem to understand (for the most part) that I'm not trying to write a comprehensive history of the beginnings of the war. I've had some very good reviews and some very bad ones. The bad ones seem to follow the teeter-totter school: that if a dictator and the nation he controls is evil, then the leader of the nation who opposes the evil dictator must be good. Life isn't that way, of course. There is in fact no "moral equivalence" created by examining coterminous violent and repulsive acts. The notion of moral equivalence is a mistake, because it undermines our notions of personal responsibility and law. Each act of killing is its own act, not something to be heaped like produce on a balancing scale. One person, as Roosevelt said, must not be punished for the deed of another--though he didn't follow his own precept.

Gandhi comes up sometimes. It was said in a review that I "adore" Gandhi. That's not quite right. Gandhi is in many ways an admirable and perceptive man. He spoke gently even while thousands of his supporters were in jail and his country was being bombed by an occupying power. But the years told on him, and he sometimes came to sound, as Nehru once observed in a memoir, cold--indifferent to suffering. He is one voice, and a voice worth listening to.

My real heroes, though, are people like Victor Klemperer, who responded to Hitlerian terror not with counterviolence, but with beautiful nonresistance: by writing a masterpiece of a diary. He and Romanian diarist Mihael Sebastian have the last word for that reason. And I've dedicated the book to British and American pacifists--I want this book to rescue the memory of their loving, troubled efforts to help.

The most interesting and helpful set of responses to the book so far has been at [www.edrants.com](http://www.edrants.com), where a

group of participants discussed *Human Smoke* for a week, adding all kinds of thoughts, analogies, comparisons, and criticisms. I've never been through anything like it before, and I'm the better for it.

**Amazon.com:** Your recent celebration of Wikipedia in the *New York Review of Books* has gotten a lot of attention (deservedly so). Did the style and philosophy of Wikipedia influence the way you wrote *Human Smoke*? Have you made any Wikipedia updates based on what you found in your research.

**Baker:** I used Wikipedia during the writing of the book, especially to check facts about subtypes of airplanes and ships--e.g., the Bristol Beaufighter I cited in the first paragraph of the review. Wikipedia is amazingly strong and precise on military hardware. (And on when a British Lord became a Viscount, and on a million other things.) But I've been writing movies, and the model I often had in my mind while working on *Human Smoke* was the movie documentary--in which short scenes and clips follow each other with a minimum of narration.

From Publishers Weekly

"Burning a village properly takes a long time," wrote a British commander in Iraq in 1920. In this sometimes astonishing yet perplexing account of the destructive futility of war, NBCC award-winning writer Baker (*Double Fold*) traces a direct line from there to WWII, when Flying Fortresses and incendiary bombs made it possible to burn a city in almost no time at all. Central to Baker's episodic narrative-- a chronological juxtaposition of discrete moments from 1892 to December 31, 1941--are accounts from contemporary reports of Britain's terror campaign of repeatedly bombing German cities even before the London blitz. The large chorus of voices echoing here range from pacifists like Quaker Clarence Pickett to the seemingly cynical warmongering of Churchill and FDR; the rueful resignation of German-Jewish diarist Viktor Klemperer to Clementine Churchill's hate-filled reference to "yellow Japanese lice." Baker offers no judgment, but he also fails to offer context: was Hitler's purported plan to send the Jews to Madagascar serious, or, as one leading historian has called it, a fiction? Baker gives no clue. Yet many incidents carry an emotional wallop-of anger and shock at actions on all sides--that could force one to reconsider means and ends even in a "good" war and to view the word "terror" in a very discomfiting context. (*Mar.*)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

It's no surprise that a pacifist portrayal of World War II will invite controversy. Yet what really seemed to divide reviewers of *Human Smoke* was not Baker's dovishness but his devices: the many short anecdotes and quotations that comprise this book. This style, which allows readers to reach their own conclusions, won over some critics, even if they remained unconvinced by Baker's pacifism. Yet many others found the book's form an offense in itself, charging that Baker takes quotations out of context and disingenuously portrays Allied leaders as the equivalents of Hitler or Stalin. Other reviewers were confused rather than incensed by Baker's many snippets, suggesting that *Human Smoke* might not be the best book for someone just learning about the war, or even for someone looking for a pacifist take. Alternatively, one reviewer suggested *Hiroshima* by John Hersey or *Stalingrad* by Antony Beevor's books that describe how any war results in horrific acts of violence by both sides.

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## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Todd Jacobs:**

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**Edward Upton:**

The reason? Because this Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization is an unordinary book that the inside of the book waiting for you to snap this but latter it will distress you with the secret that inside. Reading this book adjacent to it was fantastic author who have write the book in such remarkable way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining technique but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you for not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This excellent book will give you a lot of advantages than the other book include such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to hesitate having that book? If I had been you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

**Mary Gilbert:**

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