

Books

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The Banality of History

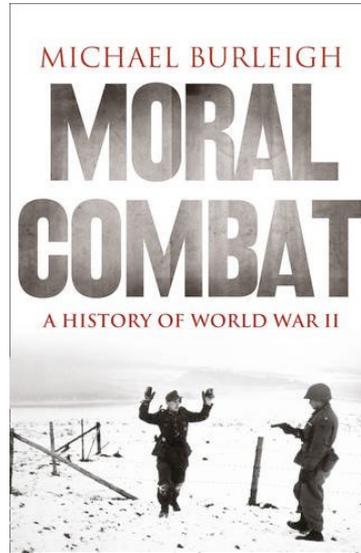
MORAL COMBAT, which received rave reviews when it first appeared in hardback last spring ('magnificent', 'outstanding', 'stunning' were typical comments), is now out in paperback, and the time is right for a sober reappraisal.

In the first sentence of his preface, Michael Burleigh appetizingly describes it as 'a moral history of the Second World War', and we think that at last someone is addressing the moral issues revolving around this so-called 'good' war. But it is not long before frustration and annoyance set in. On the same page he says it is not a work of moral philosophy, and immediately the heart sinks. How can a work of 'moral history' NOT be a work of moral philosophy? Is that possible?

He may not like the concept of 'philosophy', but his book does have 'moral' in its title, and it is reasonable to expect at least some explanation of the term. Instead, all he offers is the dubious suggestion that he is chronicling the 'prevailing moral sentiment of entire societies and their leaderships'. This disingenuous attempt to hide behind the mask of objectivity doesn't disguise the fact that he is giving us his own ethical perspective on the events he describes.

Actually, it becomes clear that Burleigh hasn't much time for philosophers and intellectuals. Thus he sneeringly writes (p164): "Wars are not conducted according to the dessicated deliberations of a philosophy seminar full of purse-lipped old maids". A page later, he informs us that, "Never having been to university, Churchill did not suffer from the slick, and vaguely fake, fluency of undergraduate debaters, counting off clever points and going through standard rhetorical gambits" (p165). Churchill is clearly one of his heroes, as is Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, head of RAF Bomber Command.

On page 415 Burleigh writes: "The cliché 'banality of evil' was coined by Hannah Arendt, a US Jewish intellectual who covered the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.



Unfortunately she had little detailed knowledge of how millions of her people had been exterminated, otherwise she might have chosen her words more carefully". But the phrase 'banality of evil' was hardly a cliché when Arendt coined it and, in any case, he misunderstands what she meant. Arendt was not in any way excusing Eichmann and co. She was demystifying the concept of evil and suggesting that the greatest crimes are often committed, not by psychopaths but by ordinary people who, in the phrase of Edward Herman, 'normalise the unthinkable'.

Burleigh regards the war as essentially a conflict between the good allies – apart from Stalin – and the bad fascists. There is hardly anything new or original here. In fact, we could describe it as 'the banality of right-wing World War Two historical analysis'. It adds nothing to our understanding of why the deaths of many millions was a price worth paying to win this war. Burleigh's basic approach is to justify anything that Britain did as at worst the lesser of two evils. He quotes Cyril Garbett, the Archbishop of York, who wrote in 1943: "it is the lesser evil to bomb a war-loving Germany than to sacrifice the lives of our fellow-countrymen who long for peace, and to delay delivering millions now held in slavery" (p505).

Yet, for a supposedly peace-loving nation, Britain has fought a hell of a

lot of wars and still does. And, of course, millions were NOT delivered from slavery – or worse. No fewer than 55 million people died. Six million Jews were not saved from the gas chambers or similar (Burleigh's feeble answer is that the Russians had more opportunities to bomb the Auschwitz railway than the western allies); half a million German civilians were killed in British-American bombing; and a quarter of a million Japanese civilians were annihilated by fire bombing and atomic bombs.

As for the country whose invasion by Germany sparked off the conflict and whose independence had been 'guaranteed', 6 million Poles died in the war and the other 25 million found themselves under the Soviet heel for two generations afterwards. Indeed, millions throughout eastern and northern Europe were saved from one dictatorship, only to find themselves submitting to another.

Burleigh's tome promises so much and delivers so little. Much of the lavish praise for the work comes from right-wing writers such as Simon Heffer, Andrew Roberts and George Walden who, not being averse to dressing up considerations of British self-interest in a pretentious cloak of morality, have found a historian after their own heart.

It's a game Britain still plays: pumping up the egos of dictators with trade, treaties, handshakes and hugs, and then shifting on to the moral high ground when self-interest dictates. Instead of being shunned and condemned from the outset, Hitler was allowed to grow in confidence by appeasement, and even in some cases a sneaking regard. When he seemed to be a real threat to Britain's self-interest, he then became a tyrant who had to be defeated.

Move on 50 or 60 years, and we witness groundhog days with the likes of Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi. Monsters all – encouraged and feted by the West, until they outlive their usefulness and have to go. Then, it's: "let battle commence; let's play more war games".