

Reluctant Experts

During the Second World War, many British people who in peacetime barely knew that “**faraway**” Czechoslovakia existed, now found themselves keeping world maps on their walls and annotating them meticulously. The location of Czechoslovakia as well as even farther-away places like Manchuria, Cyrenaica and the Coral Sea became as familiar to them as that of the local pub.

Geography was not the only subject in which they became reluctant experts. They had to learn some history too. And military strategy and tactics. And logistics and aeronautics and weapons technology. Worst of all, understanding the day-to-day news required a working knowledge of such inherently worthless and boring ideas as ‘**Lebensraum**’ and the ‘**Master Race**’.

The sudden need to assimilate large quantities of information in which they would otherwise have had no interest was a burden. Fear was diverting people's attention and creativity away from the positive endeavours that normally move the human race forwards, and into a holding pattern of self-defence. Causing this waste was part of the damage done by the Nazis to the human race.

It may seem inappropriate to dwell on this intangible, psychological injury when the perpetrators also committed some of the worst physical aggression, tyranny and genocide in history. But they are connected. People do not lightly seek out knowledge in subjects that are alien and uncongenial to them.

Today, as citizens in wartime, it is once again incumbent on us to think carefully and rationally about the morality of large-scale violence, and take refuge neither in comforting illusions nor in comforting self-abnegation. That this loss of innocence is necessary is an ugly fact. This, too, is something on which, in a better world, only specialist historians and philosophers would be experts. That every decent person has now developed a sophisticated stance on such things as collateral damage, human shields, weapons of mass destruction and unlawful combat is one of the many psychological injuries that the enemies of civilisation have inflicted on us.

It is often said that Westerners’ indifference to other cultures was a “root cause” of the present war. It was **not**. Almost the contrary is true: when, one day, the average prudent Westerner no longer feels obliged to be aware of the nuances of the term *jihad*, or the tenets of Ba'athism, or the intentions behind North Korea's latest

military procurement programme, as well as the difference between unmilitarised and **militarised anthrax**, then the war will be over. Not before.

Mon, 10/27/2003 - 17:19 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

The nuisance of learning

Does the last paragraph mean that when terrorism occurs so infrequently as to become a NUISANCE, then the war will be over? Not before. Hmm. I think I heard something like this once, but not from someone **The World** seems to have much use for.

by a reader on Tue, 11/02/2004 - 13:25 | [reply](#)

Re: The nuisance of learning

Excellent question. We may respond in a post soon.

by **Editor** on Tue, 11/02/2004 - 14:29 | [reply](#)