

AP Language & Composition - Summer Assignment 2026

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Reading

“Shooting an Elephant” – George Orwell (1936)

“The Power of Words” – Simone Weil (trans. Rees, 1962)

“The Destruction of Culture” – Chris Hedges (2002)

Instructions

Read the three essays above, annotate your copies with questions and observations about each writer’s argument, and take notes in a notebook you will use specifically for this class (any spiral-bound notebook or a composition book is fine; no, you may not do this on a computer).

As you read, pay attention to how each writer supports claims with evidence. In your notes, compare and contrast the arguments each writer makes about the nature of power. You should be prepared to discuss and formally write about these texts on the first day of class. Your notebook and your copy of the essays should accompany you to class.

Feel free to email questions.

Shooting an Elephant (1936)

By George Orwell

In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been Bugged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism – the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and

said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old 44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might be useful in terrorem. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone "must." It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of "must" is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violences upon it.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go away this instant!" and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the

skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery – and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes-faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it

of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “natives,” and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “natives” expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behavior. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of “natives”; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning

corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.

There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole, actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling. His mouth was wide open – I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I

had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast Lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. Burmans were bringing dash and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

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The Power of Words

The relative security we enjoy in this age, thanks to a technology which gives us a measure of control over nature, is more than cancelled out by the dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts between groups of men. If the danger is grave it is no doubt partly because of the power of the destructive weapons supplied by our techniques; but these weapons do not fire themselves, and it is dishonest to blame inert matter for a situation in which the entire responsibility is our own. Common to all our most threatening troubles is one characteristic which might appear reassuring to a superficial eye, but which is in reality the great danger: *they are conflicts with no definable objective*. The whole of history bears witness that it is precisely such conflicts that are the most bitter. It may be that a clear recognition of this paradox is one of the keys to history; that it is the key to our own period there is no doubt.

In any struggle for a well-defined stake each combatant can weigh the value of the stake against the probable cost of the struggle and decide how great an effort it justifies; indeed, it is generally not difficult to arrive at a compromise which is more advantageous to both contending parties than even a successful battle. But when

there is no objective there is no longer any common measure or proportion; no balance or comparison of alternatives is possible, and compromise is inconceivable. In such circumstances the importance of the battle can only be measured by the sacrifices it demands, and from this it follows that the sacrifices already incurred are a perpetual argument for new ones. Thus there would never be any reason to stop killing and dying, except that there is fortunately a limit to human endurance. This paradox is so extreme as to defy analysis. And yet the most perfect example of it is known to every so-called educated man, but, by a sort of taboo, we read it without understanding.

The Greeks and Trojans massacred one another for ten years on account of Helen. Not one of them except the dilettante warrior Paris cared two straws about her; all of them agreed in wishing she had never been born. The person of Helen was so obviously out of scale with this gigantic struggle that in the eyes of all she was no more than the symbol of what was really at stake; but the real issue was never defined by anyone, nor could it be, because it did not exist. For the same reason it could not be calculated. Its importance was simply imagined as corresponding to the deaths incurred and the further massacres expected; and this implied an importance beyond all reckoning. Hector foresaw that his city would be destroyed, his father and brothers massacred, his wife degraded to a slavery worse than death; Achilles knew that he was condemning his father to the miseries and humiliations of a defenceless old age; all

were aware that their long absence at the war would bring ruin on their homes; yet no one felt that the cost was too great, because they were all in pursuit of a literal nonentity whose only value was in the price paid for it. When the Greeks began to think of returning to their homes it seemed to Minerva and Ulysses that a reminder of the sufferings of their dead comrades was a sufficient argument to put them to shame. They used, in fact, exactly the same arguments as three thousand years later were employed by Poincaré to castigate the proposal for a negotiated peace. Nowadays the popular mind has an explanation for this sombre zeal in piling up useless ruin; it imagines the machinations of economic interests. But there is no need to look so far. In the time of Homer's Greeks there were no organized bronze manufacturers or international cartels. The truth is that the role which we attribute to mysterious economic oligarchies was attributed by Homer's contemporaries to the gods of the Greek mythology. But there is no need of gods or conspiracies to make men rush headlong into the most absurd disasters. Human nature suffices.

For the clear-sighted, there is no more distressing symptom of this truth than the unreal character of most of the conflicts that are taking place today. They have even less reality than the war between the Greeks and Trojans. At the heart of the Trojan War there was at least a woman and, what is more, a woman of perfect beauty. For our contemporaries the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters. If we grasp one of

these words, all swollen with blood and tears, and squeeze it, we find it is empty. Words with content and meaning are not murderous. If one of them occasionally becomes associated with bloodshed, it is rather by chance than by inevitability, and the resulting action is generally controlled and efficacious. But when empty words are given capital letters, then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin shedding blood for them and piling up ruin in their name, without effectively grasping anything to which they refer, since what they refer to can never have any reality, for the simple reason that they mean nothing. In these conditions, the only definition of success is to crush a rival group of men who have a hostile word on their banners; for it is a characteristic of these empty words that each of them has its complementary antagonist. It is true, of course, that not all of these words are intrinsically meaningless; some of them do have meaning if one takes the trouble to define them properly. But when a word is properly defined it loses its capital letter and can no longer serve either as a banner or as a hostile slogan; it becomes simply a sign, helping us to grasp some concrete reality or concrete objective, or method of activity. To clarify thought, to discredit the intrinsically meaningless words, and to define the use of others by precise analysis – to do this, strange though it may appear, might be a way of saving human lives.

Our age seems almost entirely unfitted for such a task. The glossy surface of our civilization hides a real

intellectual decadence. There is no area in our minds reserved for superstition, such as the Greeks had in their mythology; and superstition, under cover of an abstract vocabulary, has revenged itself by invading the entire realm of thought. Our science is like a store filled with the most subtle intellectual devices for solving the most complex problems, and yet we are almost incapable of applying the elementary principles of rational thought. In every sphere, we seem to have lost the very elements of intelligence: the ideas of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, comparison, contingency, interdependence, interrelation of means and ends. To keep to the social level, our political universe is peopled exclusively by myths and monsters; all it contains is absolutes and abstract entities. This is illustrated by all the words of our political and social vocabulary: nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy. We never use them in phrases such as: There is democracy *to the extent that* . . . or: There is capitalism *in so far as* . . . The use of expressions like 'to the extent that' is beyond our intellectual capacity. Each of these words seems to represent for us an absolute reality, unaffected by conditions, or an absolute objective, independent of methods of action, or an absolute evil; and at the same time we make all these words mean, successively or simultaneously, anything whatsoever. Our lives are lived, in actual fact, among changing, varying realities, subject to the casual play of external necessities, and modifying themselves according to specific conditions within specific limits; and yet

we act and strive and sacrifice ourselves and others by reference to fixed and isolated abstractions which cannot possibly be related either to one another or to any concrete facts. In this so-called age of technicians, the only battles we know how to fight are battles against windmills.

So it is easy to find examples of lethal absurdity wherever one looks. The prime specimen is the antagonism between nations. People often try to explain this as a simple cover for capitalist rivalries; but in so doing they ignore a glaringly obvious fact, namely, that the worldwide and complex system of capitalist rivalries and wars and alliances in no way corresponds to the world's division into nations. Two French groups, in the form of limited companies, for example, may find themselves opposed to one another while each of them is in alliance with a German group. The German steel industry may be regarded with hostility by producers of steel goods in France; but it makes little difference to the mining companies whether the iron of Lorraine is worked in France or Germany; and the wine-growers, manufacturers of Parisian articles, and others have an interest in the prosperity of German industry. In the light of these elementary truths the current explanation of international rivalry breaks down. Whoever insists that nationalism is always a cover for capitalist greed should specify whose greed. The mining companies? The electricity companies? The steel magnates? The textile industry's? The banks? It cannot be all of them, because their interests do not coincide; and if one is referring

only to a minority of them, then one must show how it is that this minority has got control of the State. It is true that the policy of a State at any given moment always coincides with the interests of some sector of capitalism, and this offers an explanation whose very superficiality makes it applicable everywhere. But in view of the international circulation of capital it is not clear why a capitalist should look to his own State for protection rather than to some foreign State, or why he should not find it as easy to use pressure and influence with foreign statesmen as with those of his own country. The world's economic structure coincides with its political structure only in so far as States exert their authority in economic affairs; and, moreover, the way they use this authority is not explicable solely in terms of economic interest. If we examine the term 'national interest' we find it does not even mean the interest of capitalist business. 'A man thinks he is dying for his country,' said Anatole France, 'but he is dying for a few industrialists.' But even that is saying too much. What one dies for is not even so substantial and tangible as an industrialist.

The national interest cannot be defined as a common interest of the great industrial, commercial, and financial companies of a country, because there is no such common interest; nor can it be defined as the life, liberty, and well-being of the citizens, because they are continually being adjured to sacrifice their well-being, their liberty, and their lives to the national interest. In the end, a study of modern history leads to the conclusion that the national interest of every State consists in

its capacity to make war. In 1911 France nearly went to war for Morocco; but why was Morocco so important? Because the populations of North Africa would make a reserve of cannon fodder; and because, for the purpose of war, a country needs to make its economy as self-supporting as possible in raw materials and markets. What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war; petrol is much more likely than wheat to be a cause of international conflict. Thus when war is waged it is for the purpose of safeguarding or increasing one's capacity to make war. International politics are wholly involved in this vicious circle. What is called national prestige consists in behaving always in such a way as to demoralize other nations by giving them the impression that, if it comes to war, one would certainly defeat them. What is called national security is an imaginary state of affairs in which one would retain the capacity to make war while depriving all other countries of it. It amounts to this, that a self-respecting nation is ready for anything, including war, except for a renunciation of its option to make war. But why is it so essential to be able to make war? No one knows, any more than the Trojans knew why it was necessary for them to keep Helen. That is why the good intentions of peace-loving statesmen are so ineffectual. If the countries were divided by a real opposition of interests, it would be possible to arrive at satisfactory compromises. But when economic and political interests have no meaning apart from war, how

can they be peacefully reconciled? It is the very concept of the nation that needs to be suppressed – or rather, the manner in which the word is used. For the word 'national' and the expressions of which it forms part are empty of all meaning; their only content is millions of corpses, and orphans, and disabled men, and tears and despair.

Another good example of murderous absurdity is the opposition between fascism and communism. The fact that this opposition constitutes today a double threat of civil war and world war is perhaps the gravest of all our symptoms of intellectual atrophy, because one has only to examine the present-day meaning of the two words to discover two almost identical political and social conceptions. In each of them the State seizes control of almost every department of individual and social life; in each there is the same frenzied militarization, and the same artificial unanimity, obtained by coercion, in favour of a single party which identifies itself with the State and derives its character from this false identification, and finally there is the same serfdom imposed upon the working masses in place of the ordinary wage system. No two nations are more similar in structure than Germany and Russia, each threatening an international crusade against the other and each pretending to see the other as the Beast of the Apocalypse. Therefore one can safely assert that the opposition between fascism and communism is strictly meaningless. Victory for fascism can only mean extermination of the communists and victory for communism

extermination of the fascists. In these circumstances it follows, of course, that anti-fascism and anti-communism are also meaningless. The anti-fascist position is this: anything rather than fascism; anything, including fascism, so long as it is labelled communism. And the anti-communist position: anything rather than communism; anything, including communism, so long as it is labelled fascism. For such a noble cause everyone in either camp is resolved to die, and above all to kill. In Berlin, in the summer of 1932, it was common to see a little group of people gather around two workmen or two petty bourgeois, one a communist and the other a Nazi, who were arguing. After a time it always became clear to both disputants that they were defending exactly the same programme; and this made their heads swim, but it only exacerbated in each of them his hatred for an opponent separated from him by such a gulf as to remain an enemy even when expressing the same ideas. That was four and a half years ago; the Nazis are still torturing German communists in the concentration camps today, and it is possible that France is threatened with a war of extermination between anti-fascists and anti-communists. If such a war took place it would make the Trojan war look perfectly reasonable by comparison; for even if the Greek poet was wrong who said that there was only Helen's phantom at Troy, a phantom Helen is a substantial reality compared to the distinction between fascism and communism.

The distinction between dictatorship and democracy, however, which is related to that between order

and freedom, is indeed an example of a real opposition. Nevertheless, it loses its meaning if we see each of the two terms as a thing-in-itself, as is usually done nowadays, instead of seeing it as a point of reference for judging the character of a social structure. It is clear that neither absolute dictatorship nor absolute democracy exists anywhere, and that every social organism everywhere is always a compound of democracy and dictatorship in different proportions; it is clear, too, that the extent to which there is democracy is defined by the relations between different parts of the social mechanism and upon the conditions which control its functioning; it is therefore upon these relations and these conditions that we should try to act. Instead of which we generally imagine that dictatorship or democracy are intrinsically inherent in certain groups of men, whether nations or parties, so that we become obsessed with the desire to crush one or other of these groups, according to whether we are temperamentally more attached to order or to liberty. Many Frenchmen, for example, believe in all good faith that a military victory for France over Germany would be a victory for democracy. As they see it, freedom inheres in the French nation and tyranny in the German, in much the same way that for Molière's contemporaries there was a dormitive virtue inherent in opium. If a day comes when the requirements of so-called 'national defence' transform France into a fortified camp in which the whole nation is totally subjected to the military authority, and if this transformed France goes to war with Germany,

then these Frenchmen will allow themselves to be killed, having first killed as many Germans as possible, in the touching belief that their blood is being shed for democracy. It does not occur to them that dictatorship arose in Germany as the result of certain conditions and that an alteration of those conditions, in such a way as to make possible some relaxation of the State authority in Germany, might be more effective than killing the young men of Berlin and Hamburg.

Another example: suppose one dared to suggest to any party man the idea of an armistice in Spain. If he is a man of the right he will indignantly reply that the fight must continue until the forces of order are triumphant and anarchy is crushed; if he is a man of the left he will reply with equal indignation that the fight must continue until the people's freedom and well-being are assured and the oppressors and exploiters crushed. The man of the right forgets that no political regime, of whatever kind, involves disorders remotely comparable to those of a civil war, with its deliberate destruction, its non-stop massacre in the firing line, its slowing down of production, and the hundreds of crimes it permits every day, on both sides, by the fact that any hooligan can get hold of a gun. The man of the left, for his part, forgets that even on his own side liberty is suppressed far more drastically by the necessities of civil war than it would be by the coming to power of a party of the extreme right; in other words, he forgets that there is a state of siege, that militarization is in force both at the front and behind it, that there is a police terror, and that

the individual has no security and no protection against arbitrary injustice; he forgets, too, that the cost of the war, and the ruin it causes, and the slowing down of production condemn the people to a long period of far more cruel privation than their exploiters would. And both of them forget that during the long months of civil war an almost identical regime has grown up on both sides. Each of them has unconsciously lost sight of his ideal and replaced it by an entity without substance. For each, the victory of what he still calls his idea can no longer mean anything except the extermination of the enemy; and each of them will scorn any suggestion of peace, replying to it with the same knockout argument as Minerva in Homer and Poincaré in 1917: 'The dead do not wish it.'

Of all the conflicts which set groups of men against one another the most legitimate and serious – one could perhaps say, the only serious one – is what is called today the *class struggle* (an expression which needs clarifying). But this is only true in so far as it is not confused by imaginary entities which obstruct controlled action, lead efforts astray, and entail the risk of ineradicable hatred, idiotic destructiveness, and senseless butchery. What is well founded, vital, and essential is the eternal struggle of those who obey against those who command when the mechanism of social power involves a disregard for the human dignity of the former. It is an eternal struggle because those who command are always inclined, whether they know it or not, to trample

on the human dignity of those below them. The function of command cannot, except in special cases, be exercised in a way that respects the personal humanity of those who carry out orders. When exercised as though men were objects, and unresisting ones at that, it inevitably acts upon them as exceptionally pliable objects; for a man exposed to the threat of death, which is really the final sanction of all authority, can become more pliable than inert matter. So long as there is a stable social hierarchy, of whatever form, those at the bottom must struggle so as not to lose all the rights of a human being. But the resistance of those at the top, although it usually appears unjust, is also inspired by concrete motives. First, personal motives; for except in rather rare cases of generosity the privileged hate to lose any of their material and moral privileges. But there are also higher motives. To those in whom the functions of command are vested it seems to be their duty to defend order, without which no social life can survive; and the only order they conceive is the existing one. Nor are they entirely wrong, for until a different order has been, in fact, established no one can say with certainty that it is possible. It is just for this reason that social progress depends upon a pressure from below sufficient to change effectively the relations of power and thus to compel the actual establishment of new social relationships. The tension between pressure from below and resistance from above creates and maintains an unstable equilibrium, which defines at each moment the structure of a society. This tension is a struggle but not a war;

and although it may in certain circumstances turn into a war, it does not inevitably do so. The story of the interminable and useless massacres around Troy is not our only legacy from antiquity; there is also the vigorous and concerted action of the Roman plebeians, who, without shedding a drop of blood, escaped from a condition verging upon slavery and obtained the institution of tribunes to guarantee their new rights. In exactly the same way the French workers, by occupying the factories, without violence, enforced the recognition of certain elementary rights and obtained elected delegates to guarantee them.

But early Rome had one important advantage over modern France. In social matters she knew nothing of abstract entities, or words in capitals, or words ending in -ism; nor any of those things which, with us, are liable to stultify the most serious efforts or to degrade the social struggle into a war as ruinous, as bloody, and as irrational in every way as a war between nations. On inspection, almost all the words and phrases of our political vocabulary turn out to be hollow. What, for example, can be the meaning of that slogan which was so popular at the recent elections – ‘the fight against the trusts’? A trust is an economic monopoly in the hands of financial powers, which is used by them not in the public interest but in such a way as to increase their own influence. What is it that is wrong about this? The fact that a monopoly is serving as the instrument of a will-to-power uninterested in the public good. But it is not

this fact that is attacked; what is attacked is the fact, which is in itself morally indifferent, that the will-to-power belongs to an economic oligarchy. The aim is to replace economic oligarchies by the State, which has a will-to-power of its own and is quite as little concerned with the public good; and a will-to-power, moreover, which is not economic but military and therefore much more dangerous to any good folk who have a taste for staying alive. And on the bourgeois side what on earth is the sense of objecting to State control in economic affairs if one accepts private monopolies which have all the economic and technical disadvantages of State monopolies and possibly some others as well? One could make a long list of pairs of complementary slogans of this kind, all of them equally unreal. The two considered above are relatively harmless, but this is not true of all of them.

For example, whatever can be in the heads of those for whom the word 'capitalism' signifies the absolute of evil? The society in which we live includes forms of coercion and oppression by which those who suffer from them are all too often overwhelmed; it includes the most grievous inequalities and unnecessary miseries. On the other hand, the economic character of this society consists in certain methods of production, consumption, and exchange, which are continually varying, however, and which depend upon certain fundamental relationships: between the production and the circulation of goods, between the circulation of goods and

money, between money and production, between money and consumption. This whole interplay of varied and changing economic phenomena is arbitrarily converted into an abstraction, which defies all definition, and is then made responsible, under the name of capitalism, for every hardship endured by oneself or others. After that, it is only natural that any man of character should devote his life to the destruction of capitalism, or rather (it comes to the same thing) to revolution – for this negative meaning is the only one possessed today by the word revolution.

Since the 'destruction of capitalism' has no meaning – capitalism being an abstraction – and since it does not refer to any precise modifications that might be applied to the regime (such modifications are contemptuously dismissed as 'reforms'), the slogan can only imply the destruction of capitalists and, more generally, of everyone who does not call himself an opponent of capitalism. Apparently it is easier to kill, and even to die, than to ask ourselves a few quite simple questions like the following: Can the laws and conventions which control our present economic life be said to constitute a system? To what extent is this or that feature of our economic life necessarily connected with the others? To what extent would the modification of this or that economic law produce repercussions among the others? How far can the ills arising from the social relations which exist today be attributed to this or that convention and how far are they attributable to the totality of conventions of our economic life? How far are they attributable to

other factors, either permanent factors which would persist after the transformation of the economic system or, on the contrary, factors which could be eliminated without putting an end to what is called the regime? What kind of hardships, either transitory or permanent, would necessarily be involved by the chosen method for transforming the regime? What new hardships might be introduced by the proposed new organization of society? If we gave serious thought to these problems we might reach the point where we could give some meaning to the assertion that capitalism is an evil; but we should mean only a relative evil, and the proposal to transform the regime would be only for the purpose of substituting a lesser evil. And the proposed transformation would be a clearly defined and limited one.

The same criticism is applicable in its entirety to those in the opposite camp, except that the concern for maintaining order replaces the concern about the sufferings of the depressed social classes and the instinct of conservation replaces the desire for change. The bourgeois always tend to regard anyone who wishes to put an end to capitalism, and sometimes even anyone who wants to reform it, as an agent of disorder; and they do so because they are ignorant as to what extent and in what circumstances the various economic relations, which are subsumed today under the general name of capitalism, are factors in preserving order. Many of them are in favour of changing nothing, because they do not know what modifications of the system may or may not

be dangerous; they fail to realize that, since conditions are always changing, the refusal to modify the system is itself a modification which may be productive of disorders. Most of them appeal to economic laws as religiously as if they were the unwritten laws invoked by Antigone, and this although they can see them changing day by day in front of their eyes. The preservation of the capitalist regime is a meaningless expression, in their mouths, because they do not know what ought to be preserved, nor how much of it; all they can mean, in practice, is the suppression of everyone who wants to put an end to the regime. The struggle between the opponents and the defenders of capitalism is a struggle between innovators who do not know what innovation to make and conservatives who do not know what to conserve; it is a battle of blind men struggling in a void, and for that very reason it is liable to become a war of extermination. The same situation exists on a smaller scale in the struggle within any industrial firm. In general, the worker instinctively blames his employer for all the hardships of work in a factory; he does not ask himself whether under any other property system the management would not inflict some of the same hardships on him, or indeed exactly the same ones, or even perhaps some worse ones; nor does he ask himself how many of these hardships might be abolished, by abolishing their causes, without any alteration of the existing property system. He identifies the struggle 'against the boss' with the undying protest of the human being oppressed by too many hardships. The head of the firm,

for his part, is rightly concerned to maintain his authority. But his authority is strictly limited to overall direction, to the due coordination of the branches of production, and to ensuring, with some compulsion if necessary, that the work is properly executed. Any industrial regime, of whatever kind, in which these functions of coordination and control can be effectively exercised is allowing sufficient authority to the heads of the firms. But the feeling of authority, in these men's minds, is especially connected with a certain atmosphere of deference and subservience which has no necessary connection with a high standard of work; and, above all, when they become aware of latent or overt opposition among their personnel they always attribute it to certain individuals, whereas in reality a spirit of revolt, whether loud or silent, aggressive or despairing, is always present wherever life is physically or morally oppressive. In the worker's mind the struggle 'against the boss' is confused with the assertion of human dignity, and in the manager's mind the struggle against the 'ringleaders' is confused with his duty to the job and his professional conscience. Both of them are tilting at windmills, so their efforts cannot be confined to reasonable objectives. When strikes are undertaken for clearly defined claims a settlement is attainable without too great difficulty, as we have sometimes seen; but we have also seen strikes which resembled wars, in the sense that neither side had any objective, strikes in which there were no real or tangible issues - apart from arrested production,

deteriorating machines, destitution, want, weeping women, and hungry children; and such bitterness on both sides that any agreement seemed impossible. In events like these there are the seeds of civil war.

If we analysed in this way all the words and formulas which have served throughout history to call forth the spirit of self-sacrifice and cruelty combined, we should doubtless discover them all to be just as empty. And yet, all these bloodthirsty abstractions must have some sort of connection with real life; and indeed they have. It may be that there was only Helen's phantom at Troy, but the Greek and Trojan armies were not phantoms; and in the same way although there is no meaning in the word 'nation' and the slogans in which it occurs, the different States with their offices, prisons, arsenals, barracks, and customs are real enough. The theoretical distinction between the two forms of totalitarian regime, fascism and communism, is imaginary, but in Germany in 1932 there existed very concretely two political organizations each of which wanted to achieve complete power and consequently to exterminate the other. A democratic party may gradually change into a party of dictatorship but it still remains distinct from the dictatorial party it is striving to suppress. France, for the purpose of defence against Germany, may submit in her turn to a totalitarian regime, but the French State and the German State will not cease to be two separate States. Both the destruction and the preservation of capitalism are meaningless slogans, but these slogans are

supported by real organizations. Corresponding to each empty abstraction there is an actual human group, and any abstraction of which this is not true remains harmless. Conversely, any group which has not secreted an abstract entity will probably not be dangerous. This particular kind of secretion is superbly illustrated by the 'Dr Knock' of Jules Romains with his maxim: 'Above the interest of the patient and the interest of the doctor stands the interest of Medicine.' It is pure comedy, because the medical profession has not so far secreted such an entity; it is always by organizations concerned with guarding or acquiring power that these entities are secreted.

All the absurdities which make history look like a prolonged delirium have their root in one essential absurdity, which is the nature of power. The necessity for power is obvious, because life cannot be lived without order; but the allocation of power is arbitrary because all men are alike, or very nearly. Yet power must not seem to be arbitrarily allocated, because it will not then be recognized as power. Therefore prestige, which is illusion, is of the very essence of power. All power is based, in fact, upon the interrelation of human activities; but in order to be stable it must appear as something absolute and sacrosanct, both to those who wield and those who submit to it and also to other external powers. The conditions which ensure order are essentially contradictory, and men seem to be compelled to choose between the anarchy which goes with inadequate power and the wars of every kind which go with the preoccupation of prestige.

All the absurdities we have enumerated cease to appear absurd when translated into the language of power. Is it not natural that every State should define the national interest as the capacity to make war, when it is surrounded by States capable of subduing it by arms if it is weak? One must either join the race to prepare for war or else be resigned to enduring whatever some other armed State may choose to inflict; no third choice seems possible. Nothing but complete and universal disarmament could resolve this dilemma, and that is hardly conceivable. And, further, a State cannot appear weak in its external relations without the risk of weakening its authority with its own subjects. If Priam and Hector had delivered Helen to the Greeks this might merely have increased the Greeks' inclination to sack a town that seemed so ill prepared to defend itself; and they would also have risked a general uprising in Troy – not because the Trojans would have been upset by the surrender of Helen, but because it would have suggested to them that their chiefs could not be so very powerful. In Spain, if one of the two sides gave the impression of wanting peace this would first have the effect of encouraging its enemies and stimulating their aggressiveness, and then it would involve the risk of uprisings among its own supporters. Again, for a man who is outside both the anti-communist and the anti-fascist blocs the clash between two almost identical ideologies may appear ridiculous; but since these two blocs exist the members of one of them are bound to see absolute evil in the other, because it will exterminate them if they are

the weaker. The leaders on each side must seem prepared to annihilate the enemy, in order to maintain their authority with their own troops; and once these blocs have achieved a certain degree of power, neutrality becomes an almost untenable position. In the same way, when those at the bottom of any social hierarchy begin to fear that unless they dispossess those above them they will be completely crushed, then, so soon as either side becomes strong enough to have nothing to fear, it will yield to the intoxication of power mixed with spite. Power, in general, is always essentially vulnerable; and therefore it is bound to defend itself, for otherwise society would lack the necessary minimum of stability. But it is nearly always believed, with or without reason, by all parties, that the only defence is attack. And it is natural that the most implacable conflicts should arise out of imaginary disputes, because these take place solely on the level of power and prestige. It would probably be easier for France to cede raw materials to Germany than a few acres of ground with the title of 'colony', and easier for Germany to do without raw materials than without the title of 'colonial power'. The essential contradiction in human society is that every social status quo rests upon an equilibrium of forces or pressures, similar to the equilibrium of fluids; but between one prestige and another there can be no equilibrium. Prestige has no bounds and its satisfaction always involves the infringement of someone else's prestige or dignity. And prestige is inseparable from power. This seems to be an impasse from which

Prestige and power

humanity can only escape by some miracle. But human life is made up of miracles. Who would believe that a Gothic cathedral could remain standing if we did not see it every day? Since the state of war is not, in fact, continuous, it is not impossible that peace might continue indefinitely. Once all the real data of a problem have been revealed the problem is well on the way to solution. The problem of peace, both international and social, has never yet been completely stated.

What prevents us from seeing the data of the problem is the swarm of vacuous entities or abstractions; they even prevent us from seeing that there is a problem to be solved, instead of a fatality to be endured. They stupefy the mind; they not only make men willing to die but, infinitely worse, they make them forget the value of life. To sweep away these entities from every department of political and social life is an urgently necessary measure of public hygiene. But the operation is not an easy one; the whole intellectual climate of our age favours the growth and multiplication of vacuous entities. Perhaps we should begin with a reform of our methods of scientific education and popularization, abolishing the artificial vocabulary which those methods crudely and superstitiously encourage. By reviving the intelligent use of expressions like *to the extent that*, *in so far as*, *on condition that*, *in relation to*, and by discrediting all those vicious arguments which amount to proclaiming the dormitive virtue of opium, we might be rendering a highly important practical service to our

contemporaries. A general raising of the intellectual level would greatly assist any educational attempt to deflate the imaginary causes of strife. As things are, there is certainly no shortage of preachers of appeasement in every sphere; but their sermons, as a rule, are not intended to awaken intelligence and eliminate unreal conflicts, but rather, by inducing somnolence, to obscure real conflicts. There are no more dangerous enemies of international and social peace than those spellbinders whose talk about peace between nations means simply an indefinite prolongation of the status quo for the exclusive advantage of the French State or those whose advocacy of social peace presupposes the safeguarding of privilege, or at least the right of the privileged to veto any change they dislike. The relations between social forces are essentially variable, and the underprivileged will always seek to alter them; it is wrong to enforce an artificial stabilization. What is required is discrimination between the imaginary and the real, so as to diminish the risks of war, without interfering with the struggle between forces which, according to Heraclitus, is the condition of life itself.

Human Personality

'You do not interest me.' No man can say these words to another without committing a cruelty and offending against justice.

'Your person does not interest me.' These words can be used in an affectionate conversation between close friends, without jarring upon even the tenderest nerve of their friendship.

In the same way, one can say without degrading oneself, 'My person does not count', but not 'I do not count'.

This proves that something is amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known as Personalism. And in this domain, where there is a grave error of vocabulary it is almost certainly the sign of a grave error of thought.

There is something sacred in every man, but it is not his person. Nor yet is it the human personality. It is this man; no more and no less.

I see a passer-by in the street. He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace.

It is neither his person nor the human personality in him which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him.

From *The Destruction of Culture*

CHRIS HEDGES

Educated at Colgate University and at the Harvard Divinity School, Chris Hedges (b. 1956) has worked as a foreign correspondent for over two decades, witnessing wars in the Balkans, Central America, and the Middle East. In 2002, he shared the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of global terrorism. His most recent book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway* (2005), is about the importance of the Ten Commandments to our time. The essay included here, "The Destruction of Culture," is taken from a chapter in his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002). Referring to the book, General Wesley K. Clark — former NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe — says, "War is a culture of its own, [Hedges] warns, and it can undercut and ultimately destroy the civil societies that engage in it."

The first casualty when war comes is truth.

— SENATOR HIRAM JOHNSON, 1917

In wartime the state seeks to destroy its own culture. It is only when this destruction has been completed that the state can begin to exterminate the culture of its opponents. In times of conflict authentic culture is subversive. As the cause championed by the state comes to define national identity, as the myth of war entices a nation to glory and sacrifice, those who question the value of the cause and the veracity of the myths are branded internal enemies.

Art takes on a whole new significance in wartime. War and the nationalist myth that fuels it are the purveyors of low culture — folklore, quasi-historical dramas, kitsch, sentimental doggerel, and theater and film that portray the glory of soldiers in past wars or current wars dying nobly for the homeland. This is why so little of what moves us during wartime has any currency once war is over. The songs, books, poems, and films that arouse us in war are awkward and embarrassing when the conflict ends, useful only to summon up the nostalgia of war's comradeship.

States at war silence their own authentic and humane culture. When this destruction is well advanced they find the lack of critical and moral restraint useful in the campaign to exterminate the culture of their opponents. By destroying authentic culture — that which allows us to question and examine ourselves and our society — the state erodes the moral fabric. It is replaced with a warped version of reality. The enemy is dehumanized; the universe starkly divided between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The cause is celebrated, often in

overt religious forms, as a manifestation of divine or historical will. All is dedicated to promoting and glorifying the myth, the nation, the cause.

The works of the writers in Serbia, such as Danilo Kis and Milovan Djilas, were mostly unavailable during the war. It remains hard even now to find their books. In Croatia the biting satires of Miroslav Krleža, who wrote one of the most searing portraits of Balkan despots, were forgotten. Writers and artists were inconvenient. They wrote about social undercurrents that were ignored by a new crop of self-appointed nationalist historians, political scientists, and economists.

National symbols — flags, patriotic songs, sentimental dedications — invade and take over cultural space. Art becomes infected with the platitudes of patriotism. More important, the use of a nation's cultural resources to back up the war effort is essential to mask the contradictions and lies that mount over time in the drive to sustain war. Cultural or national symbols that do not support the crusade are often ruthlessly removed.

In Bosnia the ethnic warlords worked hard to wipe out all the records of cohabitation between ethnic groups. The symbols of the old communist regime — one whose slogan was “Brotherhood and Unity” — were defaced or torn down. The monuments to partisan fighters who died fighting the Germans in World War II, the lists of names clearly showing a mix of ethnic groups, were blown up in Croatia. The works of Ivo Andrić, who wrote some of the most lyrical passages about a multiethnic Bosnia, were edited by the Bosnian Serbs and selectively quoted to support ethnic cleansing.

All groups looked at themselves as victims — the Croats, the Muslims, and the Serbs. They ignored the excesses of their own and highlighted the excesses of the other in gross distortions that fueled the war. The cultivation of victimhood is essential fodder for any conflict. It is studiously crafted by the state. All cultural life is directed to broadcast the injustices carried out against us. Cultural life soon becomes little more than the drivel of agitprop. The message that the nation is good, the cause just, and the war noble is pounded into the heads of citizens in everything from late-night talk shows to morning news programs to films and popular novels. The nation is soon thrown into a trance from which it does not awake until the conflict ends. In part of the world where the conflict remains unresolved, this trance can last for generations.

I walked one morning a few years ago down the deserted asphalt tract that slices through the center of the world's last divided capital, Nicosia, on the island of Cyprus. At one spot on the asphalt dividing line was a small painted triangle. For fifteen minutes each hour, Turkish troops, who control the northern part of the island, were allowed to move from their border posts and stand inside the white triangular lines. The arrangement was part of a deal laboriously negotiated by the United Nations to give Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots access to several disputed areas along the 110-mile border that separates the north from the south. The triangle was a potent reminder that once the folly of war is over, folly itself is often all that remains. . . .

War, just as it tears down old monuments, demands new ones. These new

monuments glorify the state's uniform and unwavering call for self-sacrifice and ultimately self-annihilation. Those who find meaning in the particular, who embrace affirmation not through the collective of the nation but through the love of another individual regardless of ethnic or national identity, are dangerous to the emotional and physical domination demanded by the state. Only one message is acceptable.

A soldier who is able to see the humanity of the enemy makes a troubled and ineffective killer. To achieve corporate action, self-awareness and especially self-criticism must be obliterated. We must be transformed into agents of a divinely inspired will, as defined by the state, just as those we fight must be transformed into the personification of unmitigated evil. There is little room for individuality in war. 10

The effectiveness of the myths peddled in war is powerful. We often come to doubt our own perceptions. We hide these doubts, like troubled believers, sure that no one else feels them. We feel guilty. The myths have determined not only how we should speak but how we should think. The doubts we carry, the scenes we see that do not conform to the myth are hazy, difficult to express, unsettling. And as the atrocities mount, as civil liberties are stripped away (something, with the "War on Terror," already happening to hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the United States), we struggle uncomfortably with the jargon and clichés. But we have trouble expressing our discomfort because the collective shout has made it hard for us to give words to our thoughts.

This self-doubt is aided by the monstrosity of war. We gape and wonder at the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center. They crumble before us, and yet we cannot quite comprehend it. What, really, did we see? In wartime an attack on a village where women and children are killed, an attack that does not conform to the myth peddled by our side, is hard to fathom and articulate. We live in wartime with a permanent discomfort, for in wartime we see things so grotesque and fantastic that they seem beyond human comprehension. War turns human reality into a bizarre carnival that does not seem part of our experience. It knocks us off balance.

On a chilly, rainy day in March 1998 I was in a small Albanian village in Kosovo, twenty-five miles west of the provincial capital of Pristina. I was waiting with a few thousand Kosovar Albanian mourners for a red Mercedes truck to rumble down the dirt road and unload a cargo of fourteen bodies. A group of distraught women, seated on wooden planks set up on concrete blocks, was in the dirt yard.

When the truck pulled into the yard I climbed into the back. Before each corpse, wrapped in bloodstained blankets and rugs, was lifted out for washing and burial I checked to see if the body was mutilated. I pulled back the cloth to uncover the faces. The gouged-out eyes, the shattered skulls, the gaping rows of broken teeth, and the sinewy strands of flayed flesh greeted me. When I could not see clearly in the fading light I flicked on my Maglite. I jotted each disfigurement in my notebook.

The bodies were passed silently out of the truck. They were laid on crude wooden coffin lids placed on the floor of the shed. The corpses were wound in white shrouds by a Muslim cleric in a red turban. The shed was lit by a lone kerosene lamp. It threw out a ghastly, uneven, yellowish light. In the hasty effort to confer some dignity on the dead, family members, often weeping, tried to wash away the bloodstains from the faces. Most could not do it and had to be helped away.

It was not an uncommon event for me. I have seen many such dead. Several weeks later it would be worse. I would be in a warehouse with fifty-one bodies, including children, even infants, women, and the elderly from the town of Prekaz. I had spent time with many of them. I stared into their lifeless faces. I was again in the twilight zone of war. I could not wholly believe what I saw in front of me.

This sense that we cannot trust what we see in wartime spreads throughout the society. The lies about the past, the eradication of cultural, historical, and religious monuments that have been part of a landscape for centuries, all serve to shift the ground under which we stand. We lose our grip. Whole worlds vanish or change in ways we cannot fully comprehend. A catastrophic terrorist strike will have the same effect.

In Bosnia the Serbs, desperately trying to deny the Muslim character of Bosnia, dynamited or plowed over libraries, museums, universities, historic monuments, and cemeteries, but most of all mosques. The Serbs, like the Croats, also got rid of monuments built to honor their own Serb or Croat heroes during the Communist era. These monuments championed another narrative, a narrative of unity among ethnic groups that ran contrary to the notion of ancient ethnic hatreds. The partisan monuments that honored Serb and Croat fighters against the Nazis honored, in the new narrative, the wrong Serbs and Croats. For this they had to be erased.

This physical eradication, coupled with intolerance toward any artistic endeavor that does not champion the myth, formed a new identity. The Serbs, standing in flattened mud fields, were able to deny that there were ever churches or mosques on the spot because they had been removed. The town of Zvornik in Serb-held Bosnia once had a dozen mosques. The 1991 census listed 60 percent of its residents as Muslim Slavs. By the end of the war the town was 100 percent Serb. Branko Grujic, the Serb-appointed mayor, informed us: "There never were any mosques in Zvornik."

No doubt he did not believe it. He knew that there had been mosques in Zvornik. But his children and grandchildren would come to be taught the lie. Serbs leaders would turn it into accepted historical fact. There are no shortage of villages in Russia or Germany or Poland where all memory of the Jewish community is gone because the physical culture has been destroyed. And, when mixed with the strange nightmarish quality of war, it is hard to be completely sure of your own memories.

The destruction of culture sees the state or the group prosecuting the war take control of the two most important mediums that transmit information to the nation — the media and the schools. The alleged "war crimes" of the enemy,

real and imagined, are played and replayed night after night, rousing a nation to fury. In the Middle East and the Balkans, along with many other parts of the world, children are taught to hate. In Egypt pupils are told Jews are interlopers on Arab land. Israel does not appear on schoolroom maps. In Jordan, children learn that Christians are “infidels” who “must be forced into submission,” that the Jewish Torah is “perverted,” and that Jews have only “their own evil practices” to blame for the Holocaust. Syrian schoolbooks exhort students to “holy war” and paint pictures of Israelis “perpetrating beastly crimes and horrendous massacres,” burying people alive in battle and dancing drunk in Islamic holy places in Jerusalem. And Israel, despite efforts in secular state schools to present a more balanced view of Arab history, allows state-funded religious schools to preach that Jewish rule should extend from the Nile in Egypt to the Euphrates in Iraq and that the kingdom of Jordan is occupied Jewish land.

The reinterpretation of history and culture is dizzying and dangerous. But it is the bedrock of the hatred and intolerance that leads to war.

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in a Sarajevo street, an act that set off World War I. But what that makes him in Bosnia depends on which lesson plan you pick up.

“A hero and a poet,” says a textbook handed to high school students in the Serb-controlled region of this divided country. An “assassin trained and instructed by the Serbs to commit this act of terrorism,” says a text written for Croatian students. “A nationalist whose deed sparked anti-Serbian rioting that was only stopped by the police from all three ethnic groups,” reads the Muslim version of the event.

In communist Yugoslavia, Princip was a hero. But with the partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines, huge swathes of history are reinterpreted. The Muslim books, for example, portray the Ottoman Empire’s rule over Bosnia, which lasted 500 years, as a golden age of enlightenment; the Serbs and Croats condemn it as an age of “brutal occupation.”

These texts have at least one thing in common: a distaste for [Marshal] Tito, the Communist leader who ruled the country from 1945 to 1980 and was a staunch opponent of the nationalist movements that now hold power. And Tito’s state pioneered the replacement of history with myth, forcing schoolchildren to memorize mythical stories about Tito’s life and aphorisms.

By the time today’s books in the Balkans reach recent history, the divergence takes on ludicrous proportions; each side blames the others for the Bosnian war and makes no reference to crimes or mistakes committed by its own leaders or fighters.

The Muslims are taught that the Serbs “attacked our country” and started the war. The Serbs are told that “Muslims, with the help of mujahadeen fighters from Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, launched a campaign of genocide against the Serbs that almost succeeded.”

The Croatian students learn that Croatian forces in “the homeland war” fought off “Serbian and Muslim aggressors.”

Even the classics get twisted into a political diatribe. I saw a pro-Milošević production of *Hamlet* in Belgrade that was scripted to convey the message that usurping authority, even illegitimate authority, only brings chaos and ruin. Hamlet was portrayed as a bold and decisive man, constantly training for battle. He was not consumed by questions about the meaning of existence or a desire to withdraw from society, but the steely drive to seize power, even if it plunged the kingdom into chaos. Horatio, usually portrayed as a thoughtful and humane scholar, was the incarnation of evil. 30

Hamlet's treachery was illustrated at the conclusion of the play when Prince Fortinbras of Norway entered Elsinore to view the carnage. Fortinbras, dressed to look like the chief European representative at the time in Bosnia, Carl Bildt, walked onstage with a Nazi marching song as his entrance music. He unfolded maps showing how, with the collapse of authority, he had now carved up Serbian territory among foreign powers.

"Here is a *Hamlet* for our time," the director, Dejan Krstović, told me. "We want to show audiences what happens when individuals tamper with power and refuse to sublimate their own ambitions for the benefit of the community.

"Because of Hamlet, the bodies pile up on the altar of authority and the system collapses. Because of Hamlet, the foreign prince, Fortinbras, who for us represents the new world order, comes in from the outside and seizes control, as has happened to the Serbs throughout their history."

Every reporter struggles with how malleable and inaccurate memory can be when faced with trauma or stress. Witnesses to war, even moments after a killing or an atrocity, often cannot remember what took place in front of them. They struggle to connect disparate images. And those who see events with some coherency find there is an irreversible pull to twist the facts to conform to the myth. Truth, in such moments, is too nuanced and contradictory for most to swallow. It is best left untouched.

I went one rainy afternoon to the Imperial War Museum in Vienna, mostly to see the rooms dedicated to the 1878 Bosnian rebellion and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. His car, peppered with bullet holes, and the blood-stained couch on which he died are on display. But I also wandered through the other rooms designed to honor the bloodlust and forgotten skirmishes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When I finished with the World War I exhibit I looked for the room dedicated to World War II. There wasn't one. And when I inquired at the desk, I was told there was no such exhibit in the city. World War II, at least in terms of the collective memory of the Austrian nation, unlike in Germany, might as well have not existed. Indeed, in one of the great European perversions of memory, many Austrians had come to think of themselves as victims of that war. 35

The destruction of culture plays a crucial role in the solidification of a wartime narrative. When the visible and tangible symbols of one's past are destroyed or denied, the past can be recreated to fit the myth. It is left only to those on the margins to keep the flame of introspection alive, although the destruction of culture is often so great that full recovery is impossible. Yugoslavia, a country

that had a vibrant theater and cinema, has seen its cultural life wither, with many of its best talents living in exile or drinking themselves to death in bars in Belgrade or Vienna.

Most societies never recover from the self-inflicted wounds made to their own culture during wartime. War leaves behind not memory but amnesia. Once wars end, people reach back to the time before the catastrophe. The books, plays, cinema take up the established cultural topics; authors and themes are often based on issues and ideas that predated the war. In post-war Germany it was as if Weimar had never ended, as if the war was just some bad, horrible dream from which everyone had just awoken and no one wanted to discuss.

This is why the wall of names that is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so important. It was not a project funded or organized by the state but by those who survived and insisted we not forget. It was part of America's battle back to truth, part of our desire for forgiveness. It ultimately held out to us as a nation the opportunity for redemption, although the state has prodded us back towards the triumphalism that led us into Vietnam.

But just as the oppressors engage in selective memory and myth, so do the victims, building unassailable monuments to their own suffering. It becomes impossible to examine, to dispute, or to criticize the myths that have grown up around past suffering of nearly all in war. The oppressors are painted by the survivors as monsters, the victims paint themselves as holy innocents. The oppressors work hard to bury inconvenient facts and brand all in wartime with the pitch of atrocity. They strive to reduce victims to their moral level. Each side creates its own narrative. Neither is fully true.

Until there is a common vocabulary and a shared historical memory there is no peace in any society, only an absence of war. The fighting may have stopped in Bosnia or Cyprus but this does not mean the war is over. The search for a common narrative must, at times, be forced upon a society. Few societies seem able to do this willingly. The temptation, as with the Turks and the Armenian genocide, is to forget or ignore, to wallow in the lie. But reconciliation, self-awareness, and finally the humility that makes peace possible come only when culture no longer serves a cause or a myth but the most precious and elusive of all human narratives — truth.

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Exploring the Text

1. Why does Chris Hedges open his essay with both exposition and argument? Where in the text does he shift between exposition, narration, and argument? What is the effect of shifting modes of discourse in this way?
2. Note how Hedges effects transitions. For example, what is the relationship between paragraphs 12 and 13? between 15 and 16?
3. What is the effect of the highly descriptive details in paragraphs 14 and 15? Does it detract from his argument or strengthen it?