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Guilt trip: Versailles, avant-garde & kitsch

by Roger Kimball

On John Maynard Keynes's revisionist history of World War I & its harmful consequences.

Ever and anon into the hearts of men sounds the enchanting whisper: "Ye shall be as gods." But humanity-worship is so profoundly inadequate to the true aspiration of man . . . that it must end almost fatally in some form or other of individual or collective self-worship, and indeed it ends not infrequently in devil-worship pure and simple.

—Étienne Mantoux

What a vast difference there is between the barbarism that precedes culture and the barbarism that follows it.

—Christian Friedrich Hebbel

In *Europe's Last Summer*, his brilliant book about the origins of the Great War, the historian David Fromkin dilates on the seductive beauties of the summer of 1914.¹ It was, he notes, the most gorgeous in living memory. That serene balminess seemed an objective correlative of the rock-solid political and social stability that Europe had enjoyed for decades. To be sure, percipient observers discerned troubling clouds on the horizon. As far back as the 1890s, Otto von Bismarck predicted that "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans." And his anxiety was later echoed by

many statesmen who regarded the extraordinary arms race in Russia and Germany and the Balkanization of the teetering Ottoman Empire with trepidation. In 1912, Helmuth von Moltke, then chief of staff of the German army, opined that war was “inevitable,” and “the sooner the better.” A world war, he admitted, “will annihilate the civilization of almost the whole of Europe for decades to come,” but Germany would eventually have to confront an ever-strengthening Russia. Better now, when Russia was still fledgling and Germany was taut with Prussian vigor.



Demonstrations against the Treaty of Versailles, takes place in front of the Reichstag building, 1919. Photo: German Federal Agency for Education.

On the other side, there were plenty of soothing voices to point out that the world’s increasing economic interdependence rendered any serious conflict “impossible”—that was the reassuring word one heard repeatedly. There had been no war among the Great Powers for nearly half a century, *ergo* the status quo would persist for decades, maybe forever. There would *always* be honey then for tea.

War was “inevitable.” War was “impossible.” Between the horns of that dilemma the world trod the mournfully contingent path of the actual.

When war did finally break out, it was greeted in many quarters as a lark, a holiday, a deliverance from the tedious routines of everyday life. Yes, there were some cautionary voices. “If war breaks out,” warned Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, at the end of July, 1914, “it will be the greatest catastrophe that the world has ever seen.” On August 3, when the German armies were swarming towards France and the “Rape of Belgium” was about to begin, he somberly predicted that “The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our life-time.”

But in early August, Grey’s was a minority perspective. “We’ll just pop over to France next week and be home by Christmas.” That was the popular refrain. In Germany, the mood was triumphalist. Even a moralist like Thomas Mann welcomed the war as “a purification, a liberation, an enormous hope. The victory of Germany will be . . . a victory of soul over numbers.” “The German soul,” Mann wrote, “is opposed to the pacifist ideal of civilization, for is not peace an element of civil corruption?” What contempt Mann had for the “nation of shopkeepers” across the channel.

Then in September came the first battle of the Marne. Its unprecedented slaughter exacted half a million casualties in a week. It is accounted a great victory for the Allies. But although it halted the German advance, it also paved the way for four years of that butchery by attrition that was trench warfare in the age of total war.

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It is often said that the primary existential or spiritual effect of the war was disillusionment. Barbara Tuchman, for example, notes in one of her classic studies of the Great War that the war had many results but that the dominant one was “disillusion.” She quotes D. H. Lawrence, who observed that “All the great words were cancelled out for that generation.” Honor, Nobility, Valor, Patriotism, Sacrifice, Beauty: Who could still take such abstractions seriously after the wholesale slaughter of the war?

But it’s worth interjecting two points. First, it is sometimes said that the Great War, because of its body count, the tactics of its generals, the as-it-turned-out false promise that it was “a war to end all wars,” was therefore meaningless. I submit that, on the contrary, it was instinct with significance. As David Fromkin put it at the end of *Europe’s Last Summer*, “it was fought to decide the essential questions in international politics: who would achieve mastery in Europe, and therefore in the world, and under the banners of what faith.”

Second, on the matter of culture, it is worth noting that most of the primary innovations in form and sensibility that we associate with that spirit of disillusionment predated the war. Picasso painted *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in 1907, ushering in decades of ugliness and assaults on the human form. We haven’t recovered yet. Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto, with its gleeful “smear of madness” and its giddy “war-is-beautiful” apotheosis of speed, technology, and violence, appeared in 1909. “We want no part of it, the past,” he shouted, giving voice to an entire movement that was sick and tired of bourgeois stability. Stravinsky’s primitivist extravaganza, *Le Sacre du Printemps*—he had thought of calling it “The Victim”—was first performed in Paris to Diaghilev’s carefully staged pseudo-riots in 1913.

There was a fair amount of posturing involved all around. Recalling Roger Fry’s exhibition of some post-Impressionist paintings at the Grosvenor Gallery, Virginia Woolf famously said that “On or about December 1910, human character changed.” That made the punters sit up and take notice. Was it true? It would be impolite to ask.

If there was a shift in artistic sensibility *because* of the war, I suspect that it had more to do with mood, with the quantum of braggadocio involved, than any formal innovation. Picasso, Marinetti, and early Stravinsky were brash gatecrashers. After the war the brashness evaporated, the energy turned rancid. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” T. S. Eliot wrote at the end of *The Waste Land*, a poem whose title and suspended splinters of a shattered civilization seemed to epitomize the somber flirtation with nihilism, impotence, and polysyllabic despair that the Great War left in its wake.

Such signposts, I think, are pretty familiar. The sniggering, anti-art hijinks of Dada, the progenitor of so many bad things, belong here, as do the strenuous reactions and attempted recuperations of high modernism. What I’d like to do is step back and place the cultural consequences of the war in a broader context. This is where the promised theme of misplaced guilt, highlighted in my title, comes in.

One of the most famous books to emerge in the immediate aftermath of the war was John Maynard Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace*. It was an instant bestseller. By 1924, it had been translated into eleven languages. (It is somehow appropriate that the other great bestseller that year was Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*: the spirit of Bloomsbury was riding high that year.) Keynes, the brilliant Bloomsbury economist whom the commentator David Frum percipiently called “the Nietzsche of economics,” had been at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 as a representative of the British Treasury. He quit in disgust because he thought the terms of the proposed peace treaty were too harsh. General Jan Christiaan Smuts, the South African delegate to the Conference, convinced him to write up his objections. *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which might just as well have been called “Don’t Let’s Be Beastly to the Germans,” was the result. The book is not a novel. But it occupies a place in the hinterland between fact and fiction—of moralistic melodrama, say, what the public relations people might call a “docudrama”: not true, exactly, but close enough to be described as “based on a true story.”

This is not, I know, the usual opinion about this book. On the contrary, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, along with its 1922 sequel *A Revision of the Treaty*, is widely regarded as a prophetic work of genius. Keynes's searing moral indictment of Greed and Cruelty among the Allies, even more than his gloomy economic and political prognostications, sounded a gratifying note of moral superiority that was eagerly embraced by simpatico elites. They thrilled to the book's knowingness, its sarcasm, its literary polish no less than to its message. Indeed, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* is a classic in the library of liberal hand-wringing. As such, its contentions are proposed not as arguments, but as taken-for-granted, inarguable truths about the world, in this case the historical realities of the post-war settlement and the succeeding political and economic situation.

Think about it. The one thing that *everyone* knows about the Treaty of Versailles is that, because of the overly harsh terms the Allies imposed upon Germany, it led directly to Hitler and World War II. An article in *The Economist* in 1999 epitomized this bit of folklore: The "final crime" of the Great War, the article proclaimed, was the Treaty of Versailles, which "would ensure a second world war."

As usual, Mark Twain came closer to the truth. It's not so much the things you don't know that get you into trouble, Twain wrote, as the things you do know that ain't so.

In fact, as the historian Andrew Roberts argues in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, there are good reasons for believing that the Treaty of Versailles ought to have been a good deal harsher than it was. Had it divided Germany into two parts, as happened after World War II, or perhaps returned it to its 1870 status of several independent principalities, or even had the Allies merely enforced its original terms, the world would probably have been spared Hitler and the horror of Nazism. There might well have been "no *via dolorosa* of Rhineland-Anschluss-Sudetenland-Danzig for Europe to walk between 1936 and 1939."

Roberts cites for support a neglected masterpiece in the history of polemic, Étienne Mantoux's book *The Carthaginian Peace, or the Economic Consequences of Mr. Keynes*.

Let me introduce you to Monsieur Mantoux. Born in 1913, he was a brilliant French economist. His experience with England started early. His father was a diplomat, and young Mantoux crossed the Channel six times with his family before war broke out in 1914. As a young man, he studied at the London School of Economics as well as in Paris. He joined the French Air Force in 1939 after Hitler invaded Poland. After the fall of France in 1940, Mantoux was unable to make his way to England and so went to Lyon to finish his dissertation. In 1941, he managed to travel on a Rockefeller Fellowship to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, where he wrote, in lapidary English, *The Carthaginian Peace*. In 1943, he returned to France, rejected the offer of an administrative post, and took up a position flying under General Leclerc. In April 1945, a scant week before Germany's surrender, he was killed in action outside a Bavarian village. He was thirty-two.

The “Carthaginian Peace” of Mantoux's title—what was that?

The “Carthaginian Peace” of Mantoux's title—what was that? Keynes several times charges that the Allies, and especially the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, wanted to impose a “Carthaginian Peace” upon the defeated powers, in particular upon Germany. What did Keynes mean? History provides two possibilities. There was the final Carthaginian peace at the end of the Third Punic War in 146 B.C. This was the fruit of Cato the Elder's repeated injunction “Carthago delenda est,” “Carthage must be destroyed.” The Romans burned the rival city to the ground, killed or sold into slavery the entire population and, legend has it, salted the fields. Only one bona fide Carthaginian monument from the once glittering city has come down to us, and that, appropriately enough, is a tomb.

That doesn't sound like the Treaty of Versailles, does it? Perhaps Keynes remembered the other "Carthaginian Peace," the peace treaty that followed the battle of Zama in 202 B.C. in which Scipio defeated Hannibal. The Romans appropriated most of Carthage's vessels of war, her overseas possessions, and exacted an indemnity of 4,000 talents.

Maybe that is the sort of thing that Keynes had in mind. As far as I know, he never said. But he did charge that the Treaty of Versailles sought "to weaken and destroy Germany in every possible way" and that it was "one of the most outrageous acts of a cruel victor in civilized history." Those who sign it, he said, "will sign the death sentence of many millions of German men, women, and children." The Germans, he claimed, would never be able to afford the reparations exacted by the Treaty. And as for all the provisions about the Rhineland and other territories, Keynes sniffed that the "perils of the future" lay not in "frontiers or sovereignties" but in "food, coal, and transport." As an aside, I might mention that Adolf Hitler, for one, would have been surprised to hear that.

Let's linger over that word "reparations." Can anyone hear the word straight any longer? Keynes's book took the word out of normal circulation and invested it with an aura of malignancy and unreality that persists to this day. But Germany started the war, which was fought almost entirely on foreign soil, and, along with the other Central Powers, it inflicted horrendous property damage and killed millions. As the historian Sally Marks points out, "France's ten richest industrial departments were only horrific ruins, over 1,000 square miles now a desert." German industry was intact. Why shouldn't Germany pay? Keynes claimed that the Allies sought to revenge themselves upon the Germans. But restitution is not revenge (even if it happens to be mistaken policy). It is merely justice.

Keynes predicted that if the treaty were put into effect, Europe would be threatened with "a long, silent process of semi-starvation, and of a gradual, steady lowering of the standard of living." It is true that certain aspects

of the Treaty—regarding reparations, for example—were only haphazardly imposed. (Germany began renegeing on its reparation payments within a year or two and stopped paying altogether in 1932.) But it was the territorial settlement of the Treaty, in which Germany lost more than 13 percent of its territory, that Keynes said would sharply “diminish the production of useful commodities” and lead to the starvation of those “millions of German men, women, and children.” In fact, ten years later, Europe’s production and standard of living were well above the pre-war level. Keynes predicted that the iron and steel output of Germany would diminish, but by 1927 it was producing nearly 30 percent more iron and 38 percent more steel than the record year of 1913. It was the same story with other commodities. Keynes initially warned that Germany could not afford to spend more than 20 billion goldmarks in reparations per year (in 1913, \$1 equaled about 4.1 goldmarks). Hitler, by his own reckoning, spent seven times that much *every year* from 1933 to 1939 in rearming Germany.

And by the way, if you want to see what a genuinely harsh peace treaty looks like, you need only contemplate how Germany planned to treat the Allies if it had won—Britain, for example, was to be “squeezed to the uttermost farthing”—or turn to the Treaty of Brest–Litovsk that Germany imposed upon the Bolsheviks in 1918. Russia agreed to default on its financial commitments to the Allies. It ceded the Baltic States to Germany, other territory to the Ottoman Empire, and recognized the independence of Ukraine. Russia also agreed to pay 6 billion German goldmarks in reparations. Hostilities did end, but on terms that one might almost describe as Carthaginian.

Throughout *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Keynes was careful to don his economist’s hat to supplement the moralist’s mantle. Dilating on the wickedness of reparations, for example, he embroiders his discussion with various technicalities about the difficulties of transnational currency flows. But after 1939, the Germans found that wholesale expropriation, enslavement, and extermination more than overcame these little difficulties in extracting wealth from conquered peoples. The idea that France had anything to fear from Germany in the future, Keynes said in *A Revision of the Treaty*, was “a delusion.”

It would, he explained, be “many years” before Germany once again cast her eyes Westward. Germany’s future “lies in the East.” Any fears, he wrote in *Economic Consequences*, of “a new Napoleonic domination, rising . . . from the ashes of cosmopolitan militarism” were but “the anticipations of the timid.” Whew! Everyone can relax. It was almost as reassuring as the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928, that “General Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy,” which was signed by fifty countries, including Germany, Italy, and Japan. It was a monument to idealism, perhaps, but lacked the homely wisdom of Catherine the Great’s observation that human skin is more ticklish than paper.

In another work, Keynes famously wrote that “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.” Pondering what he wrote about the Treaty of Versailles, I believe I begin to understand what Baron Keynes meant. Perhaps this is the place to note how close Keynes was to the German parties of the Treaty. As Niall Ferguson points out in *The Pity of War*, Keynes was deeply attached to Carl Melchior, Max Warburg’s right-hand man at the Hamburg Bank of M. M. Warburg & Co. He read parts of a draft of *Economic Consequences* to Melchior and Warburg, and apparently profited from their response. “Thanks to Dr. Melchior’s clear explanation,” the German Foreign Office official Kurt von Lersner recalled, “Herr Keynes . . . is trying to find common ground with us.” How nice. Posterity has not, Ferguson notes, appreciated “the extent to which Keynes was manipulated by his German friends” or “the extent to which he erred in his analysis of the consequences of the peace.”

In 1929, at the end of the third and final volume of his book on the Great War, Winston Churchill noted that by 1940 there would be twice as many men of military age in Germany as in France. That was the sort of nubbly fact that prompted Clemenceau to observe that “We do not have to beg pardon for our victory.” But that is precisely what Keynes wanted the Allies to do. One of the most notorious passages of the Treaty of Versailles was Clause 231, the so-

called “War Guilt Clause,” which required Germany and her allies to accept responsibility for all the damage and loss of life the war caused.

Keynes in effect reversed the direction of the guilt and, in an access of sentimentality that will be familiar to contemporary students of political correctness, made the perpetrators appear to be the victims and vice versa. It turns out that there is a moral variety of Keynesianism as well as the more familiar economic version. Mantoux aptly calls this transvaluation of values “meaculpism.” It’s an apt phrase. “Long before Hitler had made his appearance on the European scene,” he notes sardonically, “meaculpists were agitating for revision of the Treaty.” He continues:

When concession after concession on the part of the Allies had finally been rewarded, most properly, by the National-Socialist Revolution, they never tired of complaining that Hitler was the consequence of Versailles and of the outrageous treatment meted out to the German Republic. But from that time onwards, they became more reluctant to see their Governments acceding to Germany’s new moves. If only it had not been Hitler! How distressing to have to grant the demands of that bad man, when there were so many others to whom they could have conceded without the slightest inconvenience! But still . . . it had to be done. Versailles, you see. And if anyone was likely to forget it, Hitler would soon remind him. Abuse of the “Diktat” was a favorite gag in his grandiose nerve-war. But now his invective sounded in many ears like some ghastly echo from *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*.

Munich, as Mantoux points out, represented the apex of meaculpism. But there were many smaller peaks: the fate of Czechoslovakia, for example. Hitler gobbled up the richest bit of it in 1938. Whitehall was distressed. Paris was worried. Objections abounded. But they counted for very little in the scale overbalanced by paralyzing meaculpism. Besides, what happened in Czechoslovakia was only a matter of frontiers and sovereignties. And had not the great Keynes taught us that the real perils of the future lay not in “frontiers or sovereignties,” but in “food, coal, and transport”?

Mankind,” Étienne Mantoux observed, “is not a philanthropic institution.” But the mea-culpism of Keynes and other well-meaning, left-leaning

sages seems compelling only on the basis of a gigantic sentimentality about mankind, a faith in the goodness of man that would be touching were its results not so predictably malignant.

In a remarkable book called *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, the historian Modris Eksteins anatomizes the metabolism of the sentimentality that underwrites Keynes's embrace of guilt as an instrument of policy. Eksteins shows how sentimentality and a species of extravagant mythmaking mark the points of contact between avant-garde culture and burgeoning totalitarianism. This was especially true in Germany, the country that had advanced the radical program of the avant-garde most enthusiastically. England, by contrast, was a conservative power. Where Germany started the war to transform the world, England fought the war to preserve a world and the culture that defined it.

A key difference lies in the aestheticization of life: treating life, that is to say, as if it were a work of art devoid of human reality. On the continent, as the historian Carl Schorske put it in his classic study of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, "the usual moralistic culture of the European bourgeoisie was . . . both overlaid and undermined by an amoral *Gefühlkultur* [sentimental culture]." This revolution in sensibility amounted to a crisis of morality—what the novelist Hermann Broch called a "value vacuum"—that quickly precipitated a crisis in liberal cultural and political life. "Narcissism and a hypertrophy of the life of feeling were the consequence," Schorske wrote.

The threat of the political mass movements lent new intensity to this already present trend by weakening the traditional liberal confidence in its own legacy of rationality, moral law, and progress. Art became transformed from an ornament to an essence, from an expression of value to a source of value.

It was out of this hothouse atmosphere that Hitler, the serially disappointed art student in Vienna, was first formed. His heady experiences at the front during the war, where he was wounded at least twice, added purpose to the brew. His inconsolable rage at defeat finished the job.

Eksteins is right that the Weimar period, from 1918 to 1933, and the Third Reich, from 1933 to 1945, are “stages in a process” that began with the cultural underpinnings of the Great War and stretched forward to the end of the second war. Am I suggesting that Keynes was somehow implicated in the rise of Hitler? No, I’d say he was no more implicated than was the Treaty of Versailles. Partly because of his habit of sentimentalization, partly because of his addiction to economic melodrama and close attachment to some of the German principals, Keynes lent his enormous intellectual authority to a view of the Treaty and the post-war settlement that encouraged the conviction that, deep down, the victims were wrong to seek restitution from the aggressors. The popularity of that view —all right-thinking, i.e., left-leaning, people believe it to this day—made it impossible for the allies to invigilate the peace settlement effectively. And this failure encouraged the sorts of malignant fantasies that spread like wildfire through Germany in the Twenties and Thirties. These fantasies, Eksteins suggests, were deeply interwoven with the cultural ambitions of certain elements of the avant-garde. “Nazi kitsch,” he argues, “may bear a blood relationship to the highbrow religion of art proclaimed by many moderns.” It is here, I believe, that we touch upon some of the most telling cultural consequences of the Great War.

Let’s pause to consider the term “kitsch.” The word itself is mysterious. It seems to have its origins in the Munich art world of the late nineteenth century. But its etymology is controverted. One suggestion is that it is a German corruption of the English word “sketch.” Visiting tourists would ask for a quick drawing, *eine Skizze*, of some bucolic, picturesque scene to take home as a souvenir. The saccharine result was often a species of kitsch.

But what is kitsch? The dictionary defines it as a “sweet, sentimental product of bad taste,” “characterized by worthless pretentiousness,” whose “distinguishing mark is untruthfulness.” That is a first answer. But what does it mean to be “sentimental” in this sense?

We tend to think of sentimentality as extravagantly intense or overpowering emotion. Really, though, it is a kind of false or manufactured feeling.

“Sentimentality,” the poet Wallace Stevens observed, “is a failure of feeling.” That is where the element of “untruthfulness” comes in. The intensity is a sign not of conviction but of spuriousness. As the critic Clement Greenberg put it, “Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations.”

The sentimentality of kitsch is a sign of its falseness.

The sentimentality of kitsch is a sign of its falseness. But it is also a sign of its extravagance. Unanchored to reality, sentimentality is naturally unbounded. Kitsch is a response to a failure or disintegration of cultural values. When the world no longer speaks meaningfully to us, we shout into the void and pretend the echoes come to us from on high.

The grandiosity of kitsch is in proportion to the existential poverty out of which it arose. In this context, it is worth noting a limitation of that dictionary definition of kitsch. The sentimentality of kitsch can be “sweet,” but it can also be sour, malignant. Hence the phenomenon of Nazi kitsch. Whole books have been devoted to the subject. It was not confined to preposterous images of Hitler in gleaming armor astride a white steed and the like. It went much deeper. It was the aestheticizing not just of politics but of existence as a whole. “The German everyday shall be beautiful,” insisted one Nazi motto.

Which brings us to the curiously amphibious nature of kitsch. Kitsch lives with one foot in the realm of aesthetics and another foot in the realm of ethics. Which is why to say that something is kitsch is to utter a judgment that is moral as well

as aesthetic. The failure of kitsch is not just an artistic failing. There is an ethical dimension as well. Hermann Broch identifies kitsch as “the element of evil in the value system of art” and notes that “kitsch” describes not only certain works of art but also a certain attitude towards life. Again, the element of untruthfulness is key. “He who produces kitsch,” Broch writes, “is not someone who produces art of meager value. He is not someone of little or no talent. He is definitely not to be judged according to the standard of aesthetics but is ethically depraved; he is a criminal who wills radical evil.”

That may seem hyperbolic. We’ve certainly come a long way from corny genre scenes, paintings of puppies with big eyes, or pretentious, pseudo-classical hotel lobbies bedizened with colored lights. But Broch understands that kitsch rests on a fundamental refusal of reality, on an effort to counterfeit life, to replace reality with a species of narcissistic fantasy. The puppy with big eyes may seem innocent enough. But when extended to the whole of life and invested with the pathos of untrammelled fantasy, kitsch forms a brew that is toxic as well as infatuating. “Evil” is not too strong a word. Modris Eksteins does not mention Broch in *Rites of Spring*. But his understanding of the link between kitsch and evil is similar to Broch’s. Kitsch is a sentimentalization of reality in response to cultural failure. The greater the failure, the more malignant the sentimentalization.

I noted earlier the contention that one dominant response to the Great War was “disillusion” and a repudiation of principles named by such lofty abstractions as Honor, Patriotism, Virtue, and Beauty. It is easy to find examples of that solvent at work. But in another sense, the response to the war, especially on the continent, and most particularly in Germany, was just the opposite: it was what we might call the re-enchantment, the re-illusioning, of the world by means of a wholesale embrace of empty abstractions. The re-enchantment was malign, to be sure, but it was also thoroughgoing. Nazism was the most poisonous effort. It was, as Eksteins puts it, “an attempt to lie beautifully to the German nation and to the world.” This is where kitsch comes in. “The beautiful lie,” Eksteins writes, is

the essence of kitsch. Kitsch is a form of make-believe, a form of deception. It is an alternative to a daily reality that would otherwise be a spiritual vacuum. . . . Kitsch replaces ethics with aesthetics. . . . Nazism was the ultimate expression of kitsch, of its mind-numbing, death-dealing portent. Nazism, like kitsch, masqueraded as life; the reality of both was death. The Third Reich was the creation of “kitsch men,” people who confused the relationship between life and art, reality and myth, and who regarded the goal of existence as mere affirmation, devoid of criticism, difficulty, insight.

It is important to note that the kitsch of Nazism was not only for committed Nazis. Writing in 1944, Mantoux observed that “the German people, as a whole, . . . [have] been a willing, active, and satisfied partner—so long as things went well.” Before Hitler’s podium at those early rallies, the historian Joachim Fest observed, “the masses actually celebrated themselves.” It is often suggested that Hitler was a product of the Depression, hyperinflation, or both. These may well have been enabling or exacerbating events. But there is an important sense in which Hitler, the avid painter and devotee of Wagner, was, as Eksteins puts it, more a “creature of the German imagination rather than . . . of social and economic forces. . . . He was a mental construct in the midst of defeat and failure. The ultimate kitsch artist, he filled the abyss with symbols of beauty.” The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the “total work of art,” that Hitler aspired to create involved more than a Wagnerian stage set: Germany as a whole was his stage. “From first to last,” Eksteins writes, “the Third Reich was spectacular, gripping theater. That is what it was intended to be.” Even when Allied bombing was devastating German cities, Hitler made the immediate reconstruction of theaters and opera houses a top priority. The mythmaking had to proceed unabated.

Eksteins concludes his book with a harrowing example of this malevolent deployment of kitsch. In the final days of the war, when the Russians were closing in on Berlin, most of the Nazi high-command retreated to Hitler’s underground bunker. On May 1, Josef Goebbels had his six children injected with morphine. When they were unconscious, his wife Magda and Hitler’s personal doctor crushed ampules of cyanide in their mouths.

A few days earlier, Magda had written a farewell letter to Harald Quandt, a son by a previous marriage. “Our splendid concept,” she wrote,

is perishing and with it goes everything beautiful, admirable, noble, and good that I have known in my life. The world which will succeed the Führer and National Socialism is not worth living in and for this reason I have brought the children here too. They are too good for the life that will come after us. . . . Harald, my dear—I give you the best that life has taught me: be true—true to yourself, true to mankind, true to your country—in every respect whatsoever.

Splendid. Beautiful. Admirable. Noble. Good. What can one say in response to this nauseating performance? The kitsch, as Eksteins observes, “continued to the very end.”

In the final pages of *The Carthaginian Peace*, Étienne Mantoux recalls the remark of a New York taxi driver who said that the war would last longer than its duration. No one would have believed it in August 1914. But as we look around at the world we have inherited from that protracted conflict, we see that, as is so often the case, the paradoxical has turned out to be not contradictory but true. “What a vast difference there is,” as the poet Hebbel observed, “between the barbarism that precedes culture and the barbarism that follows it.”

Notes

1 A version of this essay was delivered as The David Armstrong Memorial Oration at the Melbourne Conversazioni in Melbourne, Australia, on August 5, 2014.

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Summary (ENCOUNTER BOOK).

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