The First Neoconservative: Herman Wouk, the Americanization of the Holocaust, and the Rise of Neoconservatism

written by Joel Brodkin | March 8, 2010

THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE intensive bombing of Serbia in 1999 as part of the need to avoid "another Holocaust" is only a recent event in the Americanization of the Nazi Holocaust: specifically its use as a propaganda theme for the defense of U.S. great power interests.

When we refer to the Americanization of the Holocaust we speak not about the atrocity itself, "but only about the rhetorical, cultural and political and religious uses to which the disaster has been put since then," as Phillip Lopate has written.[1] The Americanization of the Holocaust has been extensive. The sense of horror at Nazi crimes has been used as a foundation to develop self-justifying notions of American righteousness because the Nazi Holocaust is about the crimes of others. For any great power, a focus on the crimes of others is welcome, particularly when it is an empire built on a history of slavery and ethnic cleansing.

Herman Wouk's best-selling novels (made into films and TV mini-series) such as *The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978) brought an awareness of the Holocaust to tens of millions of Americans, making it seem an episode in U.S. history and a part of American historical experience. Wouk's work put a U.S. spin on the Nazi Holocaust, emphasizing the righteousness of U.S. military and international power and the sanctity of American institutions. In addition, in *The Caine Mutiny* (1951), Wouk created the first American neoconservative hero.

The Caine Mutiny

WOUK'S CELEBRATIVE FOCUS is most evident in his early novel of World War II, *The Caine Mutiny*. Published during the Korean War, *The Caine Mutiny* initially sold 3 million copies and won the Pulitzer Prize. A whale of a sea tale, it became a Broadway play and a Hollywood movie starring Humphrey Bogart as the ship's captain, Lieutenant Commander Queeg.

Four characters, all officers, are central to the story and the fate of the Caine, a World War I vintage mine layer. Willie Keith, the central character, is a young wealthy WASP piano-playing Princeton graduate. He comes from the Gold Coast town of Manhasset on Long Island's North Shore. The novel is the story of Willie Keith's education in the importance of accepting — indeed embracing — the concept of the chain of command. The second officer, Steve Maryk, is a peacetime fisherman with a feel for the sea. He likes naval service and hopes to make a postwar career in the navy. On the Caine he is the executive officer, the second in command.

The next officer is Tom Keefer, somewhat superior to Willie Keith in both age and rank. Tom Keefer is the villain of the novel and a contemptuous manipulator. An already published writer, Keefer does not plan to let mere naval duty interfere with his self- appointed task in life: writing the great and best-selling American war novel. Queeg, the captain, is a professional officer: an Annapolis graduate, a bit over thirty, physically unimposing and appears increasingly as the story unfolds, vindictive, incompetent, bullying and cowardly. He is nicknamed by his junior officers "old yellow stain."

Throughout the novel, Keefer, the writer, eggs on Steve Maryk, the executive officer, to take

action against Captain Queeg by reporting him to the Navy Department for incompetence. When the Caine enters a typhoon and Captain Queeg appears incapable of taking decisive action to save ship and crew, Maryk stages a mutiny, assumes command, and keeps the ship from disaster.

About Face

THE STORY OF *The Caine Mutiny* resembles Thomas Heggen's *Mr. Roberts* published five years earlier (1946). Heggen, like Wouk, was a college educated, wartime naval officer. In *Mr. Roberts*, as in *The Caine Mutiny*, readers encounter a group of civilian officers enduring the joyless routine of life on a non-combatant vessel, fighting boredom as well as their rigid and arbitrary captain. However, Caine has a pointed political agenda, different from Mr. Roberts.

To defend Maryk at his court martial, the Navy appoints Lieutenant Barney Greenwald, a peacetime lawyer and a wartime combat pilot. In the novel, Lieutenant Greenwald speaks for Wouk, the author.[2] When Greenwald first meets Maryk, he is greatly surprised "because he had already formed a clear picture of the exec: slight, thin, nervous, dark with the self-satisfied expression of a petty intellectual." Wouk provides a portrait — or rather a caricature — of the leftwing, often Jewish intellectual. Greenwald further describes the villain: "In fact, he had pictured Bill Pelham, a loud mouthed Marxist of his college days, in naval uniform."

Greenwald tries to get out of defending Maryk but then accepts when he realizes that Maryk, a real salt of the earth type, is merely a dupe for the intellectual of the conspiracy, the writer Keefer. At the court martial Greenwald wins an acquittal for Maryk, depicting Queeg as crazy. But at a party afterwards celebrating the publication of Keefer's novel as well as Maryk's acquittal, a drunk and angry Greenwald dresses down the mutineers saying that, "It is the Queegs of the world, the regular officers of the U.S. Army and Navy" that prevented his mother "from being cooked down to soap over there."

Not lawyers, not "sensitive intellectuals," not the readers of modern literature who like Marcel Proust and James Joyce, but the officers of the regular army and navy. They stopped Hitler and saved his mother from the crematorium. Greenwald adds, "[Queeg] stopped Hermann Goering from washing his fat behind with my mother." With that, Greenwald throws his wine in Keefer's face, the true instigator of the mutiny of the Caine. Later in the war, Keefer is further discredited when he displays physical cowardice in battle, prematurely abandoning his ship under fire.

A Whiteness of Our Own

IN THE 1950S, following postwar red scares and suburbanization, a conservative mood predominated in American society. Several social analysts described both the oppressive atmosphere and conformity that pervaded the social institutions and everyday life of America at the time. Among them were David Reisman (*The Lonely Crowd*, 1950), William H. Whyte (*The Organization Man*, 1957), and Harvey Swados (*On The Line*, 1957).

Whyte and Swados both considered the conformist message of Wouk's novel as an example of these negative trends.[3] While Whyte criticized Wouk's authoritarianism, he said little about the grounding of that authoritarianism in a specific interpretation of Jewish experience coupled with a justification focused on alleged Jewish interests. One comment of Whyte's stands out. In what must be the most irrelevant climax in contemporary fiction, Greenwald says that he is a Jew and that his grandmother was boiled down for soap in Germany and thanks Queeg who kept the ships going.

Whyte could not see the logic in these remarks because at the time people viewed the Holocaust as exemplifying the intense evil that had resulted from tyrannical state power. The crime of the

Holocaust demonstrated the need for individuals to respond to their consciences and not merely obey superiors. In 1945 and for sometime afterwards the idea of an authoritarian moral lesson — the importance of "following orders" as the lesson of the Holocaust — seemed unimaginable. Only Wouk's story-telling ability makes this assertion seem plausible.

Fifty years later it appears that the about face in *Caine*, while not logical, was hardly irrelevant. It foreshadows the neoconservative reverential stance towards state authority and the institutions of society. Ironically, Wouk's theme of obedience to authority does come strikingly close to the World War II slogan, "Obey, believe, fight" that covered the walls of fascist Italy.

Wouk set the groundwork for a specifically Jewish-referenced conservatism — a set of values and attitudes that privileged the existing institutions of society, particularly the military ones, and demonized the voices of critical opposition. The character of Keefer would figure greatly in the neoconservative ideology of the 1970s-1990s with its enemy being a new class of intellectuals who allegedly hated their country and its culture.

In short, Wouk helped establish a framework for Jewish conservatism, "a whiteness of our own," a defense of newly acquired privileges and opportunities in postwar suburban America, contrasted with Hitler's murder of six million Jews.[4] Wouk is proclaiming in *Caine* that Americans — and especially Jews — owe a special debt, and need to honor and glorify the U.S. military and the U.S. state for fighting Nazism.

World War II is now remembered not as a war against fascism, Nazism and racism, but rather as the triumph of righteous American might and the Good War — proof that the United States is on the side of the angels. In the late forties and fifties, writes Gary Wills, "A kind of imperial literature grew up celebrating America's epic destiny."[5] *The Caine Mutiny* was a vivid example of this celebration. As the Cold War intensified, Wouk's novel with its message of obedience to authority served to consolidate the home front by uncovering subversive attitudes, ideas, and behavior. While Wouk's subject is World War II, the overall lessons are intended for the cold war period he is writing in.

Wouk was consciously writing in opposition to much of American literature of World Wars I and II that scathingly critiqued lofty official war aims and the brutal and self-serving conduct of many professional officers. Hemingway, Dos Passos, E.E. Cummings, Norman Mailer, and Thomas Heggen all contributed to this oppositional literature. A critical stance vis-á- vis the military formed part of the modern outlook of American writers in the decades following World War I. The modern view may be defined as a skeptical attitude toward the pieties of family, religion and state, as well as the traditional hierarchies of race and gender.[6] The viewpoint arose in part from the exposure of many writers to the slaughter of World War I. The war had been presented to the public as a "war to end all wars" and a war for democracy. In the aftermath of the war, writers and others realized it had, in reality, been a conflict over power, profit, and empire.

Wouk's anti-modern attitude embraced and cherished the institutions of family, clan, and religion, as well as state and military power. Tom Keefer, like the writer Noel Airman, a character in Wouk's later novel *Marjorie Morningstar*, stands for the values Wouk despises. One represents the critical intellectual, the other the free-spirited bohemian.

For Wouk, freer sexual behavior was almost as abhorrent as Nazism and Communism. In *The Caine Mutiny* Keith's girl friend, Marie Minotti, the child of Italian immigrants, demonstrates her fitness for marriage to the wealthy WASP Keith and upward social mobility by remaining chaste amidst the loose living and easy morals of the entertainment world.

Wouk's book is a dual celebration. On the one hand, it hails the triumph of mid-century American

power. On the other, it celebrates the arrival of white ethnics in the personae of Lieutenant Greenwald and Marie Minotti. Lieutenant Greenwald embodies both aspects of this celebration. He is an officer, a lawyer, a naval aviator, and outspokenly committed to U.S. power and a parochial self-serving definition of Jewish interests.

In the character of Lieutenant Greenwald one observes the Jewish intellectual who is on the side of authority and the institutions of society — one who despises the rebels, the critics, the bohemians. In the person of Lieutenant Greenwald, the first Jewish neoconservative intellectual makes his appearance. Conservatives have agreed on the importance of the novel and the significance of its message. Not long ago a reviewer in *Forward* commented favorably on Lt. Greenwald's "eloquent speech about what a generation of Jews owes to Captain Queeg."

Queeg did not Save European Jewry

WOUK'S CLAIM THAT THE U.S. military saved world Jewry is false, as the history of World War II indicates. Auschwitz and most of the death camps where Jews were exterminated were located in Eastern Europe, and the survivors were liberated by the Red Army. In fact, 70 percent to 80 percent of all German casualties in World War II were inflicted by the Soviet Union. In North Africa, the first area to be liberated by American forces, the local fascists were reinstated in power. Anti-Semitic laws were kept in place at the behest of Robert Murphy, Eisenhower's chief political advisor. The U.S. preferred to deal with fascist elements led by Admiral Darlan. This group merely wished to change sides as the balance of power in the global conflict began to shift. Four hundred members of the anti-fascist resistance (80 percent of whom were Jewish) who had occupied the key sectors of Algiers to facilitate the Allied landings were betrayed and had to resume a clandestine existence. Only five months after the landings were Jewish and other anti-fascist prisoners freed.[7]

In Wouk's novel of World War II, *War and Remembrance*, the author has a German general snidely refer to Roosevelt's deal "with the arch collaborator Darlan." However, the consequences of the deal for Algerian Jewry go unmentioned.[8]

U.S. government policies also aided Nazis and fascists in the postwar years. Following World War II, thousands of German and Eastern European members of the S.S. and the Gestapo were brought to the U.S. by the military. Among these "immigrants" were people involved in carrying out Hitler's Final Solution. At the time Wouk was writing *Caine* there was some awareness within the American Jewish community of this fact.[9] The influx of Nazis and Nazi collaborators, combined with an initial limitation on immigration to the U.S. by survivors of the Holocaust, prompted Rabbi Stephen Wise to say in the late 1940s, "As long as we reward former servants of Hitler while leaving his victims in DP camps, we cannot even pretend we are making any real effort to achieve the aims we fought for."[10]

In Germany the sabotage of de- Nazification meant that some Holocaust survivors waited until the century's end to receive reparations from German corporations. Official U.S. policy for postwar Germany had called for the de-cartelization and de- Nazification of Germany's industrial and financial corporations due to their profit from slave labor and role in creating Hitler's war machine. However, Major General William Draper was put in charge of administering these policies. In the pre-war years Draper had served as vice-president of Dillon Reed, a Wall Street investment bank intimately involved with German finance and industry. This included the Aryanization of Jewish property in the 1930s. Draper's policies insured that the de-Nazification of Germany's large banks and corporations did not occur.[11]

In the first half of the 20th century virulent anti-Communism and murderous anti-Semitism were often bedfellows. Neoconservatives strove to obfuscate this fact as they identified Jewish wellbeing

with anti-Communist politics. However, Pierre Vidal Naquet pointed out, "in the view of the leader of the Third Reich, Judaism, Marxism and Bolshevism were all one and the same…"[12] The numerous crimes of the Soviet Union do not negate this fact. The connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Communism was not limited to Europe. In 1960 William Buckley's *National Review* opposed the Eichmann trial because it was bad for the anti- Communist cause, and additionally it became an occasion for a display of anti-Semitism in the magazine.[13]

The history of American corporate and governmental collaboration with fascists and Nazis before, during and after World War II — although the subject of repeated Congressional investigations in the 1930s and 1940s — has been ignored and concealed in the years since then. Its acknowledgment would interfere with the portrayal of American power as righteous.

The Myth of Munich

In *The Winds of War*, Wouk echoed the common point of view on the men of Munich as weaklings.[14] A similarly constructed memory of Munich played a significant role in neoconservative ideology. The neocons and the earlier liberal cold war warriors correctly connected the Holocaust to the earlier Western appeasement at Munich in 1938. In their view, the lesson of Munich and the Holocaust was the danger of appeasing totalitarians, such as Soviet Communists and radical Third World nationalists.

Every Secretary of State from John Foster Dulles ("We can't have another Munich") to Madeleine Albright ("my frame of reference is Munich not Vietnam") has invoked and obfuscated the lessons of Munich. But the aims of Hitler's Munich collaborators (as Clement Leibowitz calls them in his book *In Our Time: The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion*, 1998) were precisely the containment of not just communism, but socialism and liberalism as well. Upper class groups in England, France and the United States viewed Hitler's regime in a positive manner. They saw fascism and Nazism as away to protect their property and privileges from radical social change. In *Why England Slept*, a young John Kennedy wrote, "Germany with its early program of vigorous opposition to Communism was looked upon as a bulwark against the spread of the doctrine through Europe."[15]

Wouk and the neocons distorted the role played by the U.S. government vis-a-vis fascism and Nazism in the prewar, wartime, and postwar eras. They enveloped the American military in the glow cast by the struggle against fascism and Nazism. They did this to justify massive arms spending, a military buildup, and the global projection of American power in the post-WW II period.

The Two Nationalisms

In the mid 1970s, to intensify the Cold War, the neocons and others founded the Committee on the Present Danger II (CPD). On its Board of Directors were such neocon intellectuals as Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Midge Dector. Richard Perle was a member and would become an Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan Administration. Ronald Reagan, too, was a member.

The CPD had been created in 1976 during the Nixon-Ford detente with the Soviet Union. It propagated the false view that the U.S. was militarily inferior to the Soviet Union. This became part of Reagan's electoral program in 1980 and led to massive arms spending once he entered the White House. Its premise, like Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, was a fraud, propagated by some of the same people.[16]

Wouk and the neocons cherished a second military, that of Israel. Israel's wars were the subject of two later novels by Wouk, *The Hope* (1993) dedicated to the Israeli army, and *The Glory* (1994).

For the traditional U.S. foreign policy elite, Israel was a means to an end — protecting our oil and our Arab regimes. A 1958 National Security Council memorandum stated, "if we choose to combat radical Arab nationalism and to hold Persian Gulf oil by force if necessary, a logical corollary would be to support Israel, as the only strong pro-West power left in the Near East."[17] For the neocons and Wouk, a militarily powerful Israel, like a militarily dominant America, was also justified with reference to the Holocaust and a valued end in itself. Leading neoconservative operatives worked for both the Netanyahu government in Israel and the administration of George W. Bush.

Neoconservative ideology took on a second institutional form. In 1979, the right-wing Likud government of Menachem Begin created the Jonathan Institute. Meetings held in 1979 and 1984 were attended by such neocons as Daniel Moynihan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Dector, the Senator from Boeing, Henry "Scoop" Jackson, George H.W. Bush, as well as Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin and high-ranking intelligence officials of both states. The message conveyed was that the Palestinian struggle had to be understood in terms of Palestinians being practitioners of terror and Soviet surrogates; nothing more. The continuing removal of the indigenous Palestinian population was not an issue and could proceed apace.[18]

A common U.S. and Israeli culture and history of pioneering/ethnic cleansing gave the alliance a basis in shared values beyond mere material and policy needs. Neoliberal Al Gore stated it best when addressing an Israeli audience. "Our founders, like yours, made an errand into the Wilderness in search of a new Zion."[19] The two frontier nationalisms had indeed found common ground in the worlds of policy, ideology, and the fiction of Herman Wouk.

The Great Celebration

WOUK'S IDENTIFICATION OF Jewish wellbeing with U.S. military and economic power also reflected the remarkable change in the status of post-war American Jewry. America did indeed become a land of milk and honey for many Jews at this time. It became a place that offered Jews not only personal safety and economic betterment but also opportunities for assimilation into the American mainstream. Accompanying these positive changes and greater possibilities came increased conservatism.

The change in the status of Jews is reflected in the thoughts of the lawyer Lt. Greenwald while he is waiting to meet the leader of the mutiny. Greenwald is expecting to encounter someone "slight, thin, nervous, dark…" This is the pre-World War II racial image of Jews as people not quite white, as "miserable darkened Hebrews."[20] But the years following World War II would see the incorporation of Jews and other white ethnics into the postwar expanded segregated suburban republic, where African-Americans were barred. Moreover, this social rise was federally supported via Veterans Administration and Federal Housing Administration practices. American Jews came to have the full range of opportunities and privileges available to white people, while the society continued to enforce a highly segregated, unequal and unjust racial order.

The Caine Mutiny forms part of that great postwar Jewish American celebration in popular and academic writing lasting through the early 1960s.[21] In essence, Wouk and the above celebratory authors are making an argument that goes something like this. "I worked hard for what I have. I'm a good and deserving person. This society has recognized my moral merit and abilities and that of my group. Therefore, this must be a good society." The argument continues: "Anyone who points out the institutional basis of inequality is raining on my parade, denying me the respect I'm due and is a threat to this good society."

However, there was a hard edge to this celebration: it disparaged those who had not made it. Permeating neoconservative writing is what Robert Alter in a similar context called "the self

congratulatory attitude…a sense of complacent satisfaction of having climbed so far, and the deepest self-righteousness between ghettos past and present."

Here, too, the ethnic celebration/denigration would fit well with a national agenda to demonize and marginalize poor people of color and undo New Deal and Great Society programs.

In these ethnic Horatio Alger stories personal success and celebration became ethnic celebration, and the ethnic celebration itself became part of the national self-congratulation. These ethnic tales were privileged because they served wider needs, forming a part of the ideological argument of America as a just society, at a time when basic injustices remain embedded in the social structure.

WOUK WAS A PROPHET in 1951 when *The Caine Mutiny* was published, for anticipating a converging of interests between the American empire, the State of Israel, and organized American Jewry.

However, not all consented to this shortsighted definition of self-interest. In Israel over 500 reservists, soldiers and officers, refused occupation duty in the West Bank and Gaza since performing such service often entailed the commission of war crimes. In South Africa, Jewish heroes of South Africa's struggle for liberation, Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky along with hundreds of others, signed a Not in My Name petition protesting the occupation and comparing it to South Africa's apartheid. Some worried about the danger the alliance posed, not least of all to Jews.

Footnotes

1. Philip Lopate, "Resistance to the Holocaust," in *Portrait of My Body* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 90.

2. Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1951), 377-378.

3. .Harvey Swados, "Popular Taste and The Caine Mutiny," in *A Radical's America* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1962), 235-244; William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), 271.

4. Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 138.

5. Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 164.

6. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

7. Michael Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa During the Second World War* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Gitta Amipaz-Silber, *The Role of the Jewish Underground in the American Landing in Algiers 1940-1942* (Woodmere, New York: Gefen Books, 1992); Peter Tompkins, *The Murder of Admiral Darlan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

8. Herman Wouk, *War and Remembrance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 577-582.

9. Later in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s these policies would be detailed in books such as *Wanted: The Search for Nazis in America*, *The Belarus File*, *Blowback*, and *Secret Agenda*.

10. Tom Bower, *The Paperclip Conspiracy* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987), 208.

11. Charles Higham, *Trading with the Enemy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 210-220; James Stewart Martin, *All Honorable Men* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1950); Christopher Simpson, *The Splendid Blond Beast* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 59-74.

12. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 155.

13. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 130.

14. Herman Wouk, *The Winds of War* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971), 40-44.

15. See Clement Leibovitz and Alvin Finkel, *In Our Time: The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

16. Jerry Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

17. Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Friend in Deed: Inside the U.S.-Israeli Alliance* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 88.

18. Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead, *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection* (New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1986), 66-71; Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, *The Terrorism Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 104-106.

19. David Hirst, "The Gun and the Olive Branch Revised," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring 2003, 42.

20. Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 175.

21. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (New York: Collier Books, 1961); Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963); Harry Golden, *Only in America* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1958); Harry Golden, *Enjoy, Enjoy!* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1960); Leon Uris, *Exodus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958).