

Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Blaming the little guy for history's big crimes

History repeats itself, and it is mainly the little guy who gets it again and again.

This is true because history is written by the victors and controlled by the powerful, and because few people at any period make an effort to question it. Most people, as Bill Moyers has recently remarked, are content with "partisan information and opinion that confirm their own bias" about the past and present. And that's how people in power want it.



I was in Dresden at the end of April. It made me wonder how the history of World War-II Germany would be viewed now if the Nazis had

won the war. Imagine how our own actions will look when we decline as a culture, as we inevitably will.

Dresden has recovered from its almost complete devastation from allied fire-bombing near the end of WW II. It had become a refugee center for German civilians. Ironically, it also housed captive American soldiers and Russian prisoners. Kurt Vonnegut was among the American POW's.

In the evenings, German TV stations were running documentary footage about the fall of Nazi Germany that I had never seen, despite a long interest in German history. There was Hitler, the great leader, his face puffy and tired, personally encouraging the 10- to 12-year-old boys in ill-fitting uniforms, the last brave soldiers of the Master Race.

There was Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels' full-bodied, blonde wife Magda, inviting movie cameras into her lovely home so that her six pretty blond children could introduce themselves to the German public. It was an attempt to convey a touching image of what an Aryan family should be — how they should think and how they should live.

A German film from the war period showed young German boys becoming soldiers and getting their first taste of combat. Its script was similar to any John Wayne war film: innocence, camaraderie, longing for home and the hard punch to the guts of first buddy killed in action.

Vonnegut lived through the punch to the soul known as the fire-bombing of Dresden. On Feb. 13, 1945, RAF planes dropped nearly 1,500 tons of explosive bombs and 1,200 tons of incendiary bombs on the city. The next day, American planes dropped 1,800 explosive bombs and over 136,000 fire sticks. Photographs by Richard Peter capture a skeleton of a human being incinerated in stride and ruins on the scale of Hiroshima. If we had lost the war, those who ordered the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima would now be infamous as war criminals.

Vonnegut says that he intended after the war to write what he saw. He was sure it would be a big book that



Chuck Liddy ASSOCIATED PRESS
U.S. Army Pfc. Lynndie England.

would make him famous. It took him over 20 years to make some small sense of the enormous evil of Dresden. He had to develop a sense of irony.

Vonnegut tells a filmmaker that he is writing an anti-war book. The filmmaker says Vonnegut might as well write an anti-glacier book.

Vonnegut says that what sprung to mind when he tried to come to terms with Dresden was a ditty that begins, "My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin." It loops back on itself again and again, like history, like memories of Dresden. And Vonnegut says, "One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his."

The courts martial of Lynndie England and other of the ill-trained ordinary soldiers tried and sentenced for abuses at Abu Ghraib prison should remind us of Vonnegut's guy with the teapot, and also of Lt. William Calley in Vietnam.

England joined the Army Reserves in high school to get out of a night job at a chicken-processing factory. Divorced young, she was engaged to Specialist Charles Graner, who is accused with her of conspiracy in torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib. She is reportedly the mother of his child. She is highly suggestible. She thinks simultaneously that she is guilty and not guilty.

William Calley stood 5 feet 3 inches tall. He was insecure about his height, ill-prepared and fighting a body-count guerilla war. Boyhood friends and teachers remember him as "not able to be a good student," unlucky, "a little snake-bit," a less-than-average guy.

Our history books say the massacre at My Lai was Calley's fault. For Abu Ghraib, the military blames Lynndie England and rank-and-file soldiers like her. In Dresden, stealing a tea pot got you shot.

This is the kind of history we should have learned to question long ago. It is the kind of history we should have learned not to repeat.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.