

Rethinking history

World War II did not begin by the German invasion of Poland — as much of the media has been misinforming us during the war's 50th anniversary. It actually began months earlier, when Italy invaded King Zog's Albania and Russia attacked Finland.

I'm bringing up these points because of all the interesting, impassioned reader mail that has come in lately on my previous columns on the origins of the last war — all of which I read with care even though I don't have the resources to answer.

History has suddenly come alive, as Europeans delve back into the the tragic '30s and '40s and the worst war mankind has ever known. East Europeans, in particular, are looking into the dark recesses of their recent history and are using long-suppressed truths to loosen the fetters of Soviet rule. The time of historical glasnost has come — but not yet here in North America where Hollywood still ardently promotes wartime propaganda myths.

In 1939, Europe ignored Italy's annexation of King Zog's Albania and Stalin's invasion of Finland. The Finns, resisting ferociously, inflicted one million casualties on the Red Army. The Red Air Force lost more planes over Finland than the Luftwaffe did in the Battle of Britain. Even so, the Finns were finally defeated and forced to cede the Karelian Isthmus and the port of Vyborg to the USSR.

Today, half a century later, the Finns still live under a bullying treaty imposed on them by Stalin that sharply limits their national sovereignty. This is known in diplomacy as being "Finlandized."

Curious, then, with all the uproar in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — which lost their freedom in 1939 — that neighboring Finland has remained totally silent. Why haven't the Finns also reopened the issue of Stalin's aggression and demanded the return of Karelia?

Also ironical: The Soviet Baltic republics would be delighted to be Finlandized, becoming like Finland is today.

Let's turn next to the ugly spectacle of the fight between Jews and Catholics over a convent at

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Auschwitz. Religion often brings out the worst in people. We are now observing a sharp upsurge of anti-Semitism among Polish Catholics and strident anti-Catholicism among Jews. They're wrangling over who has the right to pray in the Nazi death camp where millions of Jews and non-Jews died.

On Tuesday, the Vatican wisely decided to move the convent out of Auschwitz. This nasty business is about much more than nuns. It's a battle to preserve the Jewish Holocaust as a unique, unrivaled event and is a struggle over who has exclusive rights to its symbol, Auschwitz. Much of the West's support for the state of Israel comes from guilt for the horror of the Holocaust and the need for a safe refuge for the Jewish people.

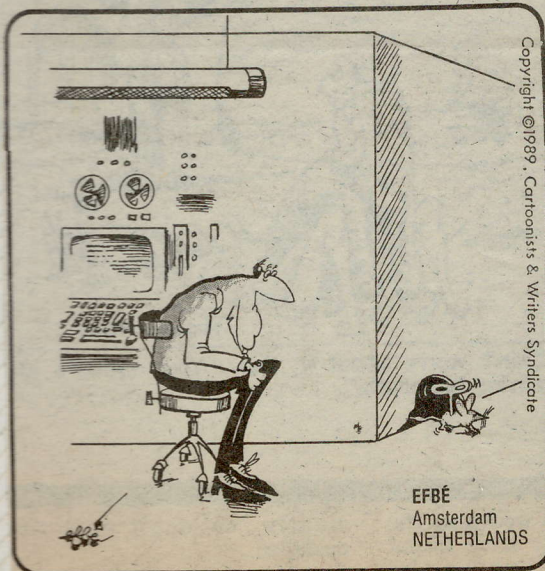
Jews are now as angry as Catholics would be if a synagogue was built on top of the sight of Christ's crucifixion. But historical glasnost is increasingly showing that there were other holocausts — perhaps not as horrible or systematic as the Jewish one — but still abominations that also cry out for attention. Jews fear, probably rightly, that revelations of other people's holocausts will diminish their own.

At least six million Ukrainians were exterminated by Stalin from 1932-1936. Why shouldn't they have their own state? More than 20 million other Russians were murdered by Stalin's thugs or in his concentration camps. Three million Poles were killed by the Soviets and Germans. Yugoslavia and Greece suffered frightful losses. Tens of millions were killed or starved to death during Mao's rule in China.

And what about the millions of German and Japanese civilians who were incinerated by U.S. and British fire bomb raids that certainly fit the definition of war crimes? Or the deeply troubling story in *Saturday Night* alleging that Gen. Dwight Eisenhower caused up to one million captured German troops to starve or die of disease?

Ironically, in the 20th century wars have killed about 36 million people. Totalitarian regimes — Russia, China and Germany — liquidated almost three times as many of their own citizens. In spite of all our moaning and groaning about the evils of war, state-organized murder killed far more victims than bombs or shells.

History's leading executioner, Stalin's Russia, was also our "democratic" ally in the "Crusade for Freedom." Europeans are beginning to face many of the brutal truths about the last war. We are lagging far behind. The Holocaust must never be forgotten, but neither the ones inflicted on other peoples. Everyone should get down on their knees at Auschwitz, rabbis, nuns and mullahs, to pray — probably futilely — that humanity is never again afflicted by the murderous tyrants of history's bloodiest century. But until we really understand what went so frightfully wrong in the 20th century, we may not be able to prevent equally bad — or even worse — horrors in the 21st.



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