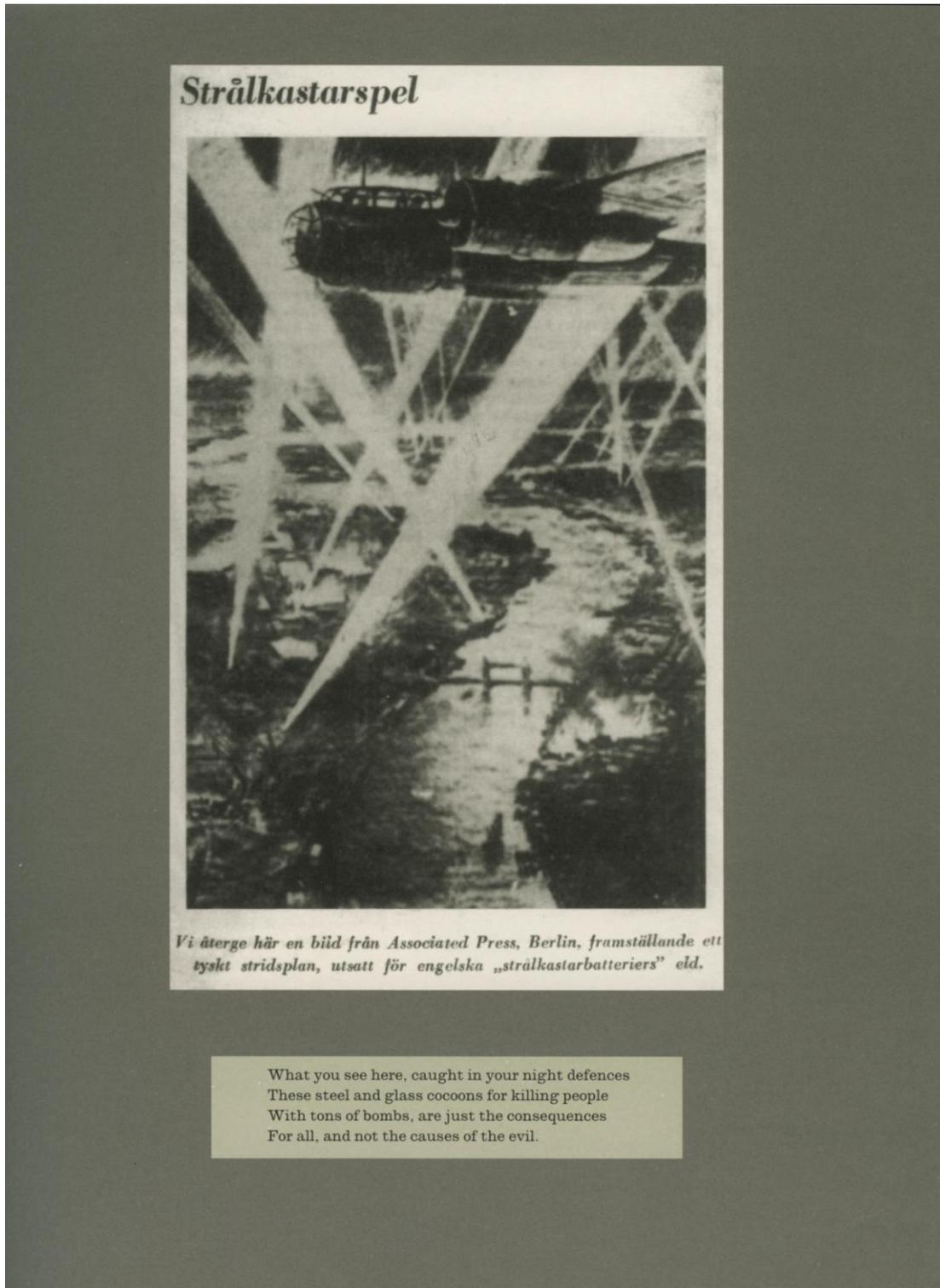


War Primer Redux

Julian Stallabrass

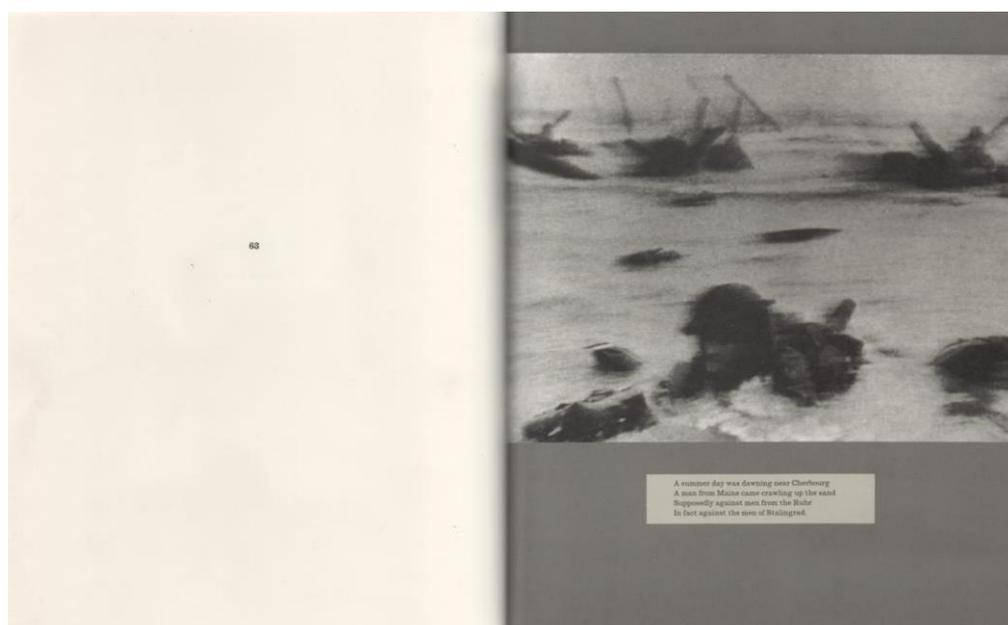
‘A nova cartilha da guerra’ [Broomberg and Chanarin’s *War Primer 2*], *Zum: Revista de Fotografia* (São Paulo), no. 5, October 2013, pp. 166-81. Published in Portuguese and English.



Imagine Bertolt Brecht, in East Germany shortly after the end of the Second World War, trying to bring his book *War Primer*, a montage of press photographs and poetic epigrams, to publication. Over nearly a decade, he faced opposition from the censors who worried about its pacifism and the ineffectiveness of its anti-imperialist message. Much of Europe lay in ruins, many of the survivors bore scars as victims, perpetrators and mourners, and the world began an uncertain bipolar future in which further and even final war seemed likely. As Brecht wrote in one of his epigrams below a collection of photographs of senior Wehrmacht officers:

Here are six murderers. Now don't turn away
And don't just nod and murmur 'That's the truth.'
Showing them up has cost us to this day
Fifty great cities and most of our youth.

Brecht's poems serve as new captions to the press photographs which, in his clippings from newspapers and magazines, often still bear the originals. Brecht was famously suspicious of photography as an ideological tool for presenting oppressive realities as natural, but he thought that it could be made to serve radical ends when subjected to critical re-reading so (as the book's introduction put it) the hieroglyphs could be decoded.



It is—and after its defeat was—easy to agree about the crimes and evils of Fascism, but the extreme sense of desolation, melancholy and unease that runs through *War Primer* is founded on a view of Fascism as a mere outcrop of capitalism and imperialism. As long as they survive, it could be reborn. So in Brecht's book, Allied politicians are shown bickering over spoils, Churchill appears as a Tommy-gun wielding gangster, and one of Capa's celebrated photographs of the D-Day landings bears this epigram:

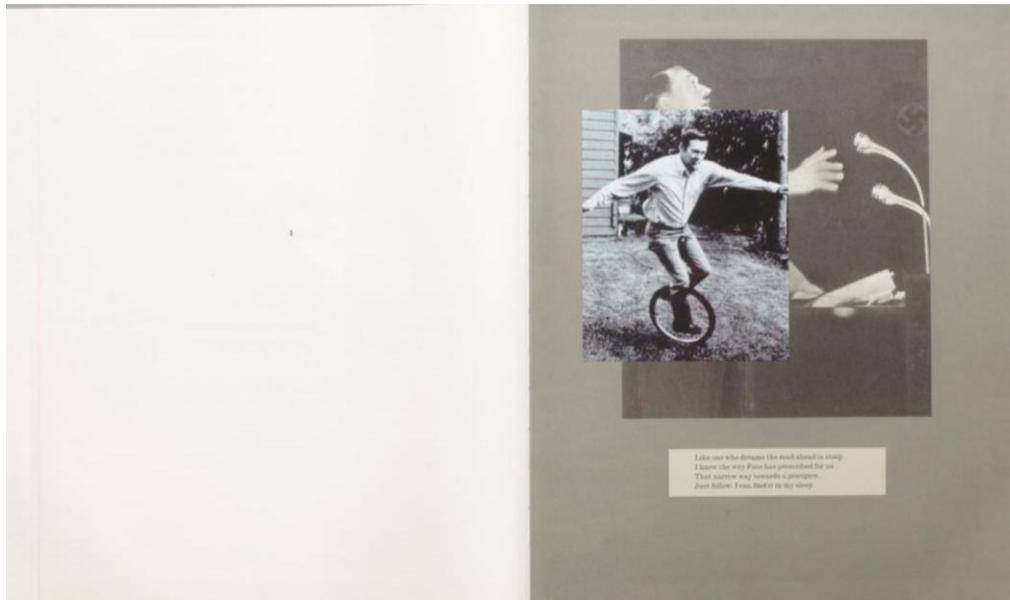
A summer day was dawning near Cherbourg
A man from Maine came crawling up the sand
Supposedly against men from the Ruhr
In fact against the men of Stalingrad.

Many ordinary Allied soldiers believed themselves to be fighting against Fascism and for a more equitable society but the motives of their masters were quite different, and included a division of the world into zones of security and exploitation. Nazism can be seen as imperialism applied to Europe, and many of its worst innovations—concentration camps, the bombing of civilians from the air, genocide—had been trialled by the British in their many colonies.

War Primer was little known in the English-speaking world, only appearing in 1998, in an edition finely translated and edited by John Willett. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who have worked together for fifteen years in an artistic partnership, making photographs and more recently refashioning archival material, have turned their attention to *War Primer*. In a calculatingly provocative act, Broomberg and Chanarin bought 100 copies of the Willett version, stuck new pictures mostly concerned with the 'War on Terror' over the old, and over-printed the original opening and closing text, though leaving the poems intact. The over-printing was in bright red ink, the colour evoking blood and urgency, of course, but also teachers' corrections to Brecht's pedagogical 'primer'. Images were found by researchers on the Internet, downloaded, printed and then stuck over Brecht's chosen images, often so as to work with them rather than simply replace them. The original source notes for the images are overlaid with the new.

Even after the appearance of Willett's translation, until recently the book remained little discussed either in relation to Brecht's work as a whole or in the history of leftist culture. So *War Primer 2* may be seen as an attempt to insist on the importance of Brecht's book by bringing it into the

new era of seemingly endless low-level warfare. Yet what does this layering of a Marxist interpretation of the devastation of war with the bellicose present yield?



To begin with Fascism, Broomberg and Chanarin offer some forthright comments on US military and political culture. The very first image in *War Primer* is of Hitler at the podium, while the epigram evokes the dictator's description of himself as being as sure as a sleepwalker—for Brecht, one heading blindly towards the precipice. In *War Primer 2*, the image is partially overlaid with a droll photograph of Donald Rumsfeld on a unicycle; the hyper-controlling architect of high-tech war at the mercy of gravity and small bumps on the ground. There is a dark humour immediately in evidence here, which runs throughout the book. It has far fewer outings in Brecht's bleak and mournful production, and when it does, it is usually sotto voce.

Another image of Hitler, this time as everyman 'eating a simple stew' but harbouring the desire for world conquest, is overlaid with a photograph of Bush carrying a roast turkey at Thanksgiving, visiting troops in Iraq in a well-publicised photo-op. Nazi bombing raids on Liverpool are overlaid with the 'Shock and Awe' attack on Baghdad. *War Primer* contains a photograph of Brecht's fellow writer, Lion Feuchtwanger behind barbed wire in a French internment camp. Feuchtwanger's eloquent and popular anti-Nazi writing had earned him the distinction of being declared 'Enemy of the State Number One' by Goebbels. Brecht's poem reads:

It's true he was their enemy's enemy

Yet, one thing they could not forgive: that he
Was enemy to his own government.
Lock up the rebel. Throw away the key.

A smiling Bradley Manning overlays that picture; and we are reminded of his persecution for telling the truth about US military policy—of his torture in prolonged solitary confinement, and his arraignment by military tribunal in which the prosecutors are asking for life imprisonment without possibility of parole.

Doubtless, the great majority of readers of books such as these can agree to condemn Fascism and its disturbing reincarnation in the national security state, which kidnaps, incarcerates, tortures and murders those it calculates to be its enemies, while spying on anyone who uses digital media. Yet how wide does this condemnation go? For Brecht, while many of the perpetrators were also victims (conscripts, after all, mostly have to do what they are told), the war bred clear monsters and heroes: the architects of mass murder on one side, and the working-class masses, particularly those serving with the Soviet armed forces or as partisans, on the other.

One immediate difficulty with taking such a view now is that it is also used insistently by the state and the mass media: the lovers of freedom versus the lovers of death, heroes against terrorists, those ‘with us or against us’. These official divisions make their opponents hesitate to make such sharp moral judgements. Equally, while in *War Primer 2* the US and its allies can sometimes stand in for the Nazis, it is less clear who stands in for their enemies. Certainly, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other assorted fundamentalist fighters are hardly an attractive model. Brecht’s paean to the Soviet workers who helped fight the German Army to a standstill on the outskirts of Moscow has its picture overlaid with a depiction of an anti-Gaddafi force in training, a relatively safe choice. But his picture of Spanish Fascists kneeling in prayer to thank God for their victory, of which Brecht wrote: ‘The mob is vulgar. God is a Fascist’, is overlaid with an unidentified photograph of an Islamic militia at prayer. While it is true that Islamists are more often seen as victims than as perpetrators in *War Primer 2*, there is a clash of fundamentalisms on offer here, in which the implied enemy is faith and certainty.

Without that clarity of political judgement, there is a danger that mapping common genres of war photography, one over the other across time, may lead to limp, liberal conclusions about the eternal horrors of human conflict, or some such clichéd formulation. The trophy pictures of

corpses are one genre, suffering and grieving civilians another, devastated cities yet another. Perhaps, then, as Brecht put it about liberal anti-Fascists: ‘They are not against the property relations which engender barbarism; they are only against barbarism itself.’ Yet the quality and character of the images may give pause to that interpretation. First, garish colour often overlays black and white, and the pixel and the JPEG artefact overlay the smudges and dots of newsprint halftone. More importantly, amateur productions often replace the professional images on which Brecht relied. Perhaps these images reveal themselves more readily than those taken by photojournalists, so many of whom had internalised the ideological frames in which their publishers wished to cage events. The amateur images more often crudely point to some (often bleeding) chunk of reality, as if to say simply: ‘this was there—as was I’. Often, too, the presence of photographers is highly evident, in a way rarely allowed in press pictures. Highly image-conscious people perform for and behind the camera. They make the hieroglyphs a little easier to read; as does the fact that so many people habitually make photographs, and so read them as producers as well as consumers.



In a remarkable essay, ‘Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties’, published in 1935, and reprinted in *War Primer 2*, Brecht lays out the criteria for political effectiveness in writing: have the courage to tell the truth, the keenness to recognise it, the skill to make it a weapon and judge who can use it, and the cunning to spread it widely.

How cunning is *War Primer 2*? Brecht fought persistently against East German government censorship to get his book published in a first edition of 10,000 copies in 1955, just a year before his death. The elevated tone and form of the poetry may have helped partially mask thoughts that were uncomfortable to the regime and its narrative of post-war political memory.

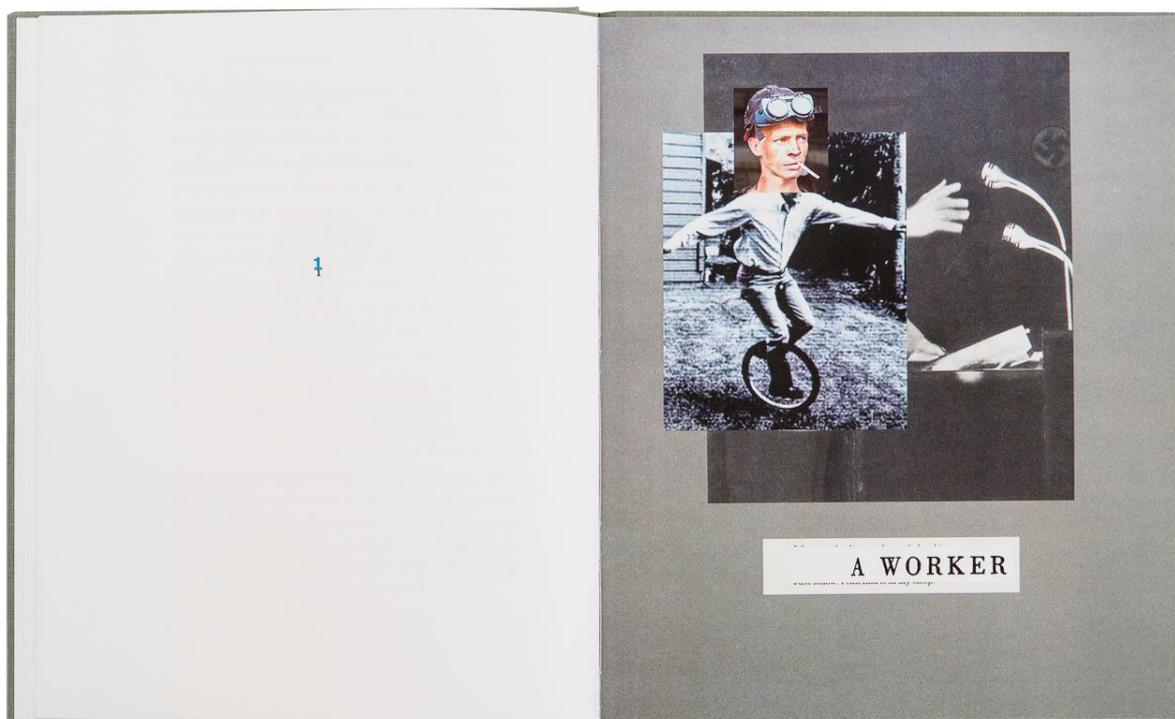
Broomberg and Chanarin launched *War Primer 2* (2011), necessarily a limited edition artists' book, with the provocative alteration or vandalism of the Willett books. They gave a talk about the book at the London Frieze Art Fair in 2011, selling out the edition instantly. They followed up with a free digital edition for Kindle, iPad and other formats, and one can well imagine that it may have an appeal and a use for cultural and political activists in thinking about image manipulation, collaging and captioning. This is all the more so because the digital edition contains an extensive collection of writings about both books. The book has helped propel Broomberg and Chanarin's already well-known work to greater prominence, winning them the 2013 Deutsche Börse photography prize, and a showing in MoMA for *War Primer 2* in the autumn. Brecht worked with Hanns Eisler to set the poems to music, though only a few of these operatic songs were realised; Broomberg and Chanarin plan an opera to complete the cycle, accompanied by video sourced in much the same way as the photographs. A fragment was performed recently at the Photographers' Gallery in London.

All of this is pretty cunning, on Brecht's terms. The high-quality, limited edition, tied to the object of the book, effectively launched a project that exposes Fascist elements of the US state—not usually a message that it is easy to get across in the mainstream media in Europe, let alone in the US. The price of the book was kept quite low, so that ownership could encompass opinion makers and not be confined to the super-rich. The downloadable version (from which I have been working) offers a different, readily accessible experience. It has two odd and not very cunning drawbacks: the online references are not activated so to follow them you have to retype them into the browser; and (perhaps due to the neglect of *War Primer*) very few pages of the original are to be found online so, without the Willett book to hand, comparison is difficult.

What of Brecht's other criteria? There is a remarkable contrast between Brecht's 1935 essay and even the best of the academic writing that follows it. Brecht offers, after all, a 'Primer' and is confident of the truths that he conveys and that he is able to convey them. When he wrote, he did so with the considerable force of the labour movement and the Communist states at his arm. He wrote to change things, and to change others so that they may also change things. Some of

the academic essays offer acute analyses of Brecht's aesthetics, tactics, situation and difficulties, and some of them hold out the hope that Brecht's lessons may once again be put to use. But in Europe, at least, those hopes still seem faint, as protest remains episodic, impotent and often merely gestural. After all, Broomberg and Chanarin overlay Brecht's 'six murderers' with pictures of politicians' hands, gesturing as they talk: these murderers remain unpunished, free to make money off their memoirs and the after-dinner speech circuit.

Some of this contrast is also found in *War Primer 2* itself. Can a Primer be written if no one yet knows what lessons to teach? Or, more fundamentally, are unsure that they can ever know? Here is the price of cunning: that the ethos of the art world, from within which the project is hatched, is constitutionally devoted to the supposed freedom that is granted by ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction. They free the individual to pleasantly meander through thoughts and feelings, but they say nothing to the collective.



Lewis Bush's critical reworking of *War Primer 2*, also available as a free download, adds another layer of photography to the Broomberg and Chanarin pages, and effaces the captions with fragmentary texts from Brecht's famous poem, 'A Worker Reads History'. Here, surely, is an example of the positive effect that Brecht (and Walter Benjamin) hoped for in the making of art works that revealed their methods clearly: that they would empower viewers to make their own

pieces; that they would not stand as fixed, eternal masterpieces but would become waypoints in the flux of an adaptable, participatory and popular culture, one that would critically reflect on its situation and the powers that bring it into being.

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