



## **WWII AS A US-LED WESTERN IMPERIALIST WAR IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE***

**Abstract:** *Slaughterhouse-five* departs from the Western official history books and romanticized heroic narratives of WWII by openly problematizing WWII as an imperialist war waged on the part of the US-led Allied forces. The novel raises the issue of the firebombing of Dresden and its erasure from official history records as a part of a larger picture, which, as this article argues, has to do with geopolitical agendas pursued on the part of the allied forces during and after WWII. The novel functions as a condemnation of the way expansionist wars are justified and domesticated to the extent they are no longer perceived as problematic and the way their violence is assigned to collective amnesia by means of cover-ups and extensive propaganda. By raising the spectre of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-five* aims to provide a set of corrective and magnifying glasses for the understanding of WWII and the role of the US in it, which calls for an interdisciplinary approach based on a systemic geopolitical analysis and meticulous historical input.

**Key words:** WWII, imperialism, the US, Dresden, Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-five*

### **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

*Slaughterhouse-five* (1969) revolves around the firebombing of the city of Dresden by the American and the British air forces in February 1945, and by extension, focuses on the role the US played (in the re-division of the world) during and after WWII. Vonnegut was an American prisoner of war who survived the firebombing of Dresden and joined the ranks of the few survivors by mere accident. *Slaughterhouse-five*, according to the author, is the result of his twenty-three year recuperation process and part of the attempt to see behind the official stories

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<sup>2</sup> The Introduction to this article is a revised and shortened version of a short explanatory text in my students' script (American literature and its socio-political context, Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana, 2014, pp. 105-109), that I have first outlined for the purpose of didactic use in my seminar course on Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five* and other 20th-century classics of American literature.

glorifying the US involvement in WWII. The novel represents the author's attempt of coming face to face with the real history of the US and its elites against the official wall of silence and censorship. As a result, *Slaughterhouse-five* by necessity ends up problematizing WWII as a "good war" waged on the part of the US-led Western forces by putting it into a broader but so often overlooked or suppressed geopolitical perspective. Consequently, *Slaughterhouse-five* functions as a specific form of a testimonial narrative. To re-adapt Herman's observation, far from carrying only a "private, spiritual dimension" that arises out of an individual's healing process, it also carries a "public" one (qtd. in Veas-Gulani, 2003: 183). It is a testimonial narrative that also stands out for its "political and judicial" dimension (ibid.) which stems from the author's search for systemic truth.<sup>3</sup> This in turn gives rise to the geopolitical understanding of WWII as a global imperialist war (Zinn 2005; Mandel 1986; Heartfield 2012) that put in place American hegemony (Chomsky 2012), and as the mother of all US-led Western wars to follow in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chomsky 2000).

Mainstream critics have labelled *Slaughterhouse-five* an anti-war novel, reducing and reconfiguring it to an instance of a "moral injunction" against war in general (Rigney, 2009: 21). As a result, literary analyses of *Slaughterhouse-five* are kept within restricted parameters where war gets to be discussed and viewed in terms of its grisliness, imploding bodies and resulting horrors (Matheson, 1984: 230). In this way, the analyses end up being typically restricted to the discussions that revolve around the "crippling nature [of war] and the terrible toll that modern warfare extracts from those forced to live through it" (Veas-Gulani, 2003: 183). This kind of focus leads to a sweeping conclusion that wars are by default simply amoral and unnecessary.<sup>4</sup> Yet Vonnegut's novel is not so much a moral

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<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five* has received praise for its "meticulously researched and historically accurate treatment of World War II". (Jarvis 104).

<sup>4</sup> The danger associated with such a stance is that it focuses merely on the immediate effects of wars such as dying but not at all on their causes and the agendas pursued. Critical inattention of this kind leads to the lumping of all forms of armed conflict into the same basket, failing, for example, to differentiate between wars of occupation and wars of resistance and liberation. As a result, such critical inattention ends up relativizing all wars as amoral and mindless including those fought out of necessity by resistance

condemnation of WWII as it is an attempt at its contextualization. The novel destroys the official mantra of WWII being a good war waged on the part of the US through the disclosure of what Vonnegut refers to as “the Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned” (qtd. in Miller, 2005: 122), which he places side by side with Hiroshima and then the napalm bombing of Vietnam. This in turn helps to put the significance of WWII into a broader historical perspective (Jarvis 2003). Rather than being a protest novel against any kind of war, *Slaughterhouse-five* turns out to be an exemplary form of protest writing against specific kind of wars, that is, imperialist wars waged over the course of the last century by the US and its Western allies under the pretext of democracy and human rights (Chomsky 2012; Chomsky 2000).

For this purpose, *Slaughterhouse-five*, which was published at the height of the US occupation war against Vietnam, also uses narrative juxtapositions through which WWII and the Vietnam War of the 1960s become clearly and inextricably interwoven. With the immediate focus placed upon the firebombing of Dresden, the novel thus might be “set during one historical era” but in fact it also “speaks to the political [reality and] concerns of its contemporary audience” (Mustazza, 2011: 3), establishing a structural link between WWII and a seemingly isolated regional war in Vietnam. Literary critics that rely on a psychoanalytic approach understand the fragmentation of the linear time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to be symbolic of the mental collapse and physical detachment typically suffered by those who have been directly affected and most often psychologically scarred by the horrors of war. However, the narrative technique is not so much dependent on the fragmentation of linear time, which would leave its parts entirely free-floating, as it is on their realignment into meaningful juxtapositions. The point is to make “the parallels and continuities” between WWII and the Vietnam war as one in a series of post-WWII wars waged on the part of the US-led Western forces clearly visible. By constantly oscillating between

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movements. Furthermore, precisely by pushing aside “the cause and strategic aims of various wars” (Rigney, 2009: 21), such a stance also risks discrediting liberation wars whose protagonists are forced, in the face of repressive measures and other means of violence used by occupational forces or their local proxy governments, to resort to “extraparliamentary activity” and willy-nilly to armed resistance (Petras, 1999: 2).

the chronological present and the past, to the extent that the two not only intermix but merge into a single time unit, the narrative rests on a “circular structure”. Circularity, on the basis of which the narrator keeps returning to Dresden and which he also connects to the events beyond WWII, functions as a form of critical investigation. Or, as observed by McGinnis, its cyclical nature enables the novel to address “the large themes” (2011: 151). *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as also pointed out by Jarvis, uses the fracturing of chronological narrative and time travel in order to “simultaneously address World War II and Vietnam [as a part of] an attempt to undermine the privileged space that the [image of WWII as a] good war occupies in America’s cultural imagination” (2003: 96). This kind of comparative view is accomplished by the main protagonist becoming “unstuck” or “spastic in [chronological] time” (Vonnegut, 2009: 29). Billy Pilgrim can “walk[] through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941 [and then go] back through that door to find himself in 1963” (29). The effect is that of a “cubist painting” (Jarvis, 2003: 101) whereby “all past [WWII] and present [Vietnam war] moments in his life are always simultaneously present” (Rigney, 2009: 14). This kind of montage makes it possible to simultaneously foreground the parallels between the two wars and, more importantly, to point to the continuities in the nature of the two wars. By yanking the two imperialist wars from the deceptively isolationist and atomizing concept of chronological time and by setting them side by side, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can thus offer “a specific re-examination of WWII” (Jarvis, 2003: 104). Because of the continual presence of imperial wars waged by the Western forces, the novel thus demonstrates that any kind of differentiation between “the past, present and future” would be misleading (Rigney, 2009: 14). The continuity of imperial wars in fact means that one lives in a “continual present”, which is why the main protagonist alongside the reader is not allowed to and can never fully leave WWII behind (Vees-Gulani, 2003: 177). WWII thus comes to function as the ultimate traumatic experience: it is a ghostly presence and a comparative backdrop to other ensuing imperialist wars of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, requiring a broader historical and political contextualization.

## **WWII as an imperialist war: historical background**

As amply documented by historians, the US entry into WWII was the result of its attempt to secure and deepen its grip over the Pacific and South Asian belt rich in natural resources and to establish a firm foothold in Europe's economy and its central markets (Heartfield, 2012: 15-16; Zinn, 2005: 406-442). This strategy was foreshadowed already in the 1920s and the 1930s by the invasion of, for example, the Philippines on the one hand, and, on the other, by the imposition of extremely high reparations on Germany after WWI. Their primary beneficiaries were to be American banks and later American firms, which, in exchange for defaulted reparation debts, were to acquire major shares in the main German companies/cartels at the time (Sutton 2010; Zinn 2005). Japan, an American ally in WWI, became by the early 1930s its major competitor for influence in South Asia, endangering the geopolitical interests of the expanding American empire. As delineated by Zinn, what prompted the US to enter into war against Japan was neither Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland nor the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the ensuing bloodbath thereafter but "the Japanese attack on [Pearl Harbor,] a [strategic] link in the American Pacific Empire" (Zinn, 2005: 410). As summarized by Zinn (*ibid.*):

So long as Japan remained a well-behaved member of that imperial club of Great Powers who – in keeping with the Open Door Policy – were sharing the exploitation of China, the United States did not object. It had exchanged notes with Japan in 1917 saying, "the Government of the United States recognizes that Japan has special interests in China." [...] It was when Japan threatened potential U.S. markets by its attempted takeover of China, but especially as it moved toward the tin, rubber, and oil of Southeast Asia, that the United States became alarmed and took those measures which led to the Japanese attack: a total embargo on scrap iron, a total embargo on oil in the summer of 1941.

In this respect, the so-called "State Department memorandum on Japanese expansion", drawn one year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, is even more telling:

[o]ur general diplomatic and strategic position would be considerably weakened – by our loss of Chinese, Indian and South Seas markets (and by our loss of much of the Japanese

market for our goods, as Japan would become more and more self-sufficient) as well as by insurmountable restrictions upon our access to the rubber, tin, jute, and other vital materials of the Asian and Oceanic regions. (Zinn, 2005: 411)

Similarly, in Europe in the 1920s and the 1930s, the US elites sought to ensconce themselves into the central European markets, first via Wall Street financial institutions and later via corporate companies with a specific focus on Germany (Sutton 2010, Chomsky 2012, Zinn 2005). Thus, with “American financiers [even] directly represented on the boards of two of three major German cartels” that went on to finance Hitler (Sutton, 2010: 28), American money poured in to strengthen the industrial sectors centred around war industry. It played a key role in propping up the Nazi war-machinery with the explicit aim of channelling Germany’s imperial appetites toward the Soviet Union. The aim was to destroy the Soviet Union as the bedrock of socialism and hence as the common arch enemy of all imperialist capitalist powers, with Nazi Germany, as it was hoped, exhausting and self-destroying itself in the process (Mandel, 1986: 22). This would enable the US to finally install its own economic policy in central Europe to its own advantage by seizing a complete control of German economy, a policy implemented in the aftermath of direct occupation and later expanded through the so-called Marshall Plan or American economic aid to include other Western European states (Chomsky, 2012: 19). While the first part of the strategy collapsed with the Soviet Union emerging out of WWII strengthened rather than weakened and destroyed, the point of the so-called economic aid to Western capitalist states was two-pronged. On the one hand, it was meant to ensure overseas export markets for American products and to establish “a network of American corporate control”, and, on the other, to “save capitalism” (Zinn, 2005: 413, 438) by directly influencing political decisions in Europe, that is, by stifling the rising power of socialist parties in order to prevent socialist revolutions in Western European countries (Chomsky, 2012: 19). This was often openly admitted also by a number of American diplomats, including the US ambassador to Moscow: “Economic assistance is one of the most effective weapons at our disposal to

influence European political events in the direction we desire ...” (Zinn, 2005: 414).

This constellation of forces or rather imperial rivalries and alliances is also poignantly captured in *Slaughterhouse-five*, along with the Nazi promulgation of the racist-nationalistic ideology that constituted Russians and the rest of the Slavs as a dehumanized category of non-people (Gonen, 2000: 184-5). In its so-called *Drang nach Osten* or the drive toward the (European) East, the Nazi-war machinery declared Slavs fit to be enslaved and worked to death, that is, to be used and treated as yet another natural resource in concentration work camps and/or exterminated in the wake of German occupation to make space for German *Lebensraum* (Mandel, 1986: 22). This ideology of deserving and non-deserving groups of people along with imperial rivalries, based on the actors’ mutual adoration and emulation of each other’s imperial prowess (Césaire 2000), constitutes the foundation of the imperial war, which in *Slaughterhouse-five* is symbolically laid bare at the point when the American prisoners of war, including Billy Pilgrim, join the British POWs in a prison complex that turns out to have been “originally constructed as an extermination camp for Russian prisoners of war” (Vonnegut, 2009: 102). While the British and the Americans are kept in a separate section of the camp where they are well fed and “adored by the Germans” (2009: 120), they are surrounded by endless rows of sheds housing “starving Russians” (2009: 104), whose faces, as a result of systemic undernourishment, “glow like radium dials” (2009: 115). The English are not only admired by the Germans, who believe them to “make war look stylish and reasonable, and fun” but also “considered as close friends” (2009: 120). This is a hardly disguised echo of Hitler’s admiration of the British empire and its treatment of the native populations, based on the implementation of racist policy worldwide (Buchanan, 2008: 325). Hitler was in awe of the British imperialism and the British empire which he believed Nazi Germany should emulate in its expansion towards the East, that is, in its occupation and destruction of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Slavic countries lying in-between (Keleny, 197, n. pg.; Ferenc, 1968: 11). Poignantly, in the novel, it is the Russian prisoners of war that act as servants to both the Germans and the English prisoners of war, while the two parties are busily engaged in a mutual admiration and recognition of

each other's humanity. In this sense, while the Germans bestow upon the British POWs extra treats like soup and bread which they wheel into the English section of the camp in wagons "pulled by Russians", the English make haste to "send over real coffee and sugar and marmalade and cigarettes and cigars" (Vonnegut, 2009: 187-88).

### ***Slaughterhouse-five's* larger picture: The firebombing of Dresden**

With at least 3000 tons of explosive and incendiary devices dropped, the air raid, which lasted "14 hours and ten minutes" (Freese, 2009: 17), levelled the residential parts of the largely undefended city to the ground, wiping out most of the population swollen with incoming refugees and prisoners of war including American and British ones. It is estimated that the coordinated attack<sup>5</sup> resulted in the death of 135,000 people by suffocating or burning them alive as a result of the combined use of incendiaries and explosive devices for the very first time in the history of modern military warfare (Greiner, 2011: 116). In one of the interviews, Vonnegut, who comes up with the same information in his novel, refers to the city's wanton destruction on the part of allied forces in point blank terms as "an atrocity", and in the novel as "the greatest massacre in European history" (128) bigger than Hiroshima (12). In another interview, Vonnegut goes on to confess that "when we went to war, we felt our Government was a respecter of life, careful about not injuring civilians and that sort of thing. Well, Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it. All that was startling to us" (qtd. in Allen, 2011: 253). The main question the novel poses at this point is why the saturation bombing of the city of Dresden was to remain a top secret to the American public and why it was carried out in the first place (Vonnegut, 2009: 14) despite the fact that the city was of no military or industrial significance. By revealing the Dresden bombing to be a part of a bigger scheme that would go on to include the saturation bombing of Tokyo and the dropping of atomic bomb on Hiroshima (and a few days later on Nagasaki too), and as

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<sup>5</sup> An attack of the same design mounted against the city of Hamburg and coordinated alongside that of Dresden was codenamed Gomorrah (Matheson, 1984: 204)



something standing in stark contrast to the Allied official explanations given for these bombings, the novel helps to dismantle the official mantra of WWII being a noble war, as promulgated in American history books and by the likes of brigadier general Rumford, “the official Airforce historian and a multibillionaire from birth” (Vonnegut, 2009: 236), with whom Billy Pilgrim finds himself in the same hospital room decades after the war.

Dresden was one in a series of the German cities (Frankfurt, Essen, Cologne, and Hamburg) to undergo a complete destruction as a result of indiscriminate saturation bombing, with primary targets being residential areas rather than military installations, war industry and railway infrastructure (Belamy, 2008: 41). Confessions that later surfaced by pilots show that “the crews were given no strategic aiming” (Hari, 2004: n. pag; Pedlow, 2004: n.). Instead, they were under the order that “anywhere within the built-up area of the city would serve” (ibid.). Installations that might be of military significance were in fact to be spared in order to be later taken over by the allied forces, which would aid them in their taking over of the country. In fact, Dresden had no military installations or war industry of any significance, a fact also clearly delineated by Vonnegut’s narrator. We get to learn that on top of being “jammed with refugees” (2009: 202), Dresden’s “principal enterprises were medicine and food-processing and the making of cigarettes” (2009: 190). Billy Pilgrim and the rest of the American POWs, who end up as “contract labour” (2009: 163) in a factory producing malt syrup rich in vitamins and minerals for pregnant women, are thus put at ease by their English counterparts before leaving the prison camp. The British are of course, tellingly, in the know: “You needn’t worry about bombs, by the way. Dresden is an open city. It is undefended, and contains no war industries or troop concentrations of any importance” (2009: 186). According to McKee and other historians, the allied forces were not interested in targeting any of the military and economic infrastructure the city might possess. In fact, the RAF, for example, “even lacked proper maps of the city. What they were looking for was a big built-up area which they could burn, and that Dresden possessed in full measure” (1984: 70). The firebombing that was to wreak utter destruction, and which Vonnegut compares to the scale of destruction described in

biblical texts about Sodom and Gomorra, was the essential part of the strategy agreed on by the American and British allies already at the beginning of 1943 (Zinn, 2005: 421). Namely, blanket bombing raids were to be carried out indiscriminately to bring about “the destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system and the undermining of the morale of the German people to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened” (Zinn, 2005: 421). Yet under Churchill’s instructions, as pointed out by historians, significant exemptions were to be made: “it seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, should be reviewed. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land. We shall not, for instance, be able to get housing material out of Germany for our own needs because some temporary provision would have to be made for the Germans themselves” (qtd. in Plowright, 2007: 91). And, in another revised memo to his chiefs of staff, Churchill goes on to say: “It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of the so called ‘area bombing’ of German cities should be reviewed from the point of view of our own interests. ... We must see to it that our attacks do not do more harm to ourselves in the long run [...]” (qtd. in Plowright, 2007: 91).

The idea was to sufficiently weaken the country, primarily by destroying the morale of the population, while strategically preserving at least some of its military and industrial infrastructure to help the allies establish its foot in the country and facilitate its restructuration in favour of the design that would benefit the interests of American capital. It was in this context and as a part of this larger plan that detonating bombs, followed by incendiaries, started falling on Dresden. Combined together, they were meant to “produce far greater devastation than either one could have done” (qtd. in Allen, 2011: 253), a horror that Vonnegut describes in one of his interviews in the following way (ibid.):

They went over with high explosives first to loosen things up, and then scattered incendiaries. When the war started, incendiaries were fairly sizeable, about as long as a shoebox. By the time Dresden got it, they were tiny little things. They burnt the whole damn town down. . . . A fire

storm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by the tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damned thing to breathe. . . . It was a fancy thing to see, a startling thing. It was a moment of truth, too, because American civilians and ground troops didn't know American bombers were engaged in saturation bombing.

In the novel, Vonnegut records the blanket bombing of the residential areas of Dresden, describing the sounds of explosions, which Billy Pilgrim and the rest of the prisoners hear while sheltering in the basement of a meat locker, as though they resembled "giant footsteps above" (2009: 226) He goes on to explain: "Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked..." (ibid.). And after the dropping of the incendiaries, "Dresden was one big flame. That flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn", so that in the end "Dresden was like the moon [with there] nothing but [molten] minerals" (2009: 227). When the Americans and their guards come out of the shelter a day after the bombing and find themselves stumbling through smouldering ruins still dangerously hot to the touch, they realize their survival was a matter of pure luck or more precisely, a matter of miscalculation. For, as the informed narrator goes on to explain: "one thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in that design. There were to be no moon men after all" (2009: 230). To make this a reality, American fighter planes are sent in once again, this time under the overhanging pall of smoke, "to see if anything is moving [... and to] spray [the remaining civilians] with machine-gun bullets" (ibid.).

The fact that the bombing of Dresden was "a military necessity", as was supposedly also the atom-bombing of Hiroshima, is something, as we are reminded by Vonnegut's narrator quoting Air Marshal Saundby, "few would believe" (2009: 240) even at the time the air raids were launched. In a single concluding sentence that rounds off the devastating description of the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut goes on to offer the official reason given for the bombing of the city, a reason also officially put into circulation by President Truman in his radio speeches when "on the March of 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, an air attack on

Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using [again] incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83,793 people. [And then when] the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,379 people” (240). “The idea” – as Vonnegut reminds us by echoing and at the same time putting under question the official explanation given for the destruction of Dresden (and later Tokyo and Hiroshima) – “was to hasten the end of the war” (2009: 230), supposedly and paradoxically to save human lives. Yet, it was very well known to the intelligence agencies that Nazi Germany was on its hind legs and drawing its last breaths before the saturation bombing of the cities like Dresden took place. And it was also very well known to the American intelligence agency, which broke the Japanese secret code system already back in 1941, that Japan was crumbling and would have surrendered even before the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Zinn, 2005: 421-424). As pointed out by Vonnegut, and corroborated by declassified archival records, the firebombing and the destruction of Dresden was “kept secret for many years after the war” from the Americans but “[i]t was no secret from the Germans, of course” (2009: 245). And much more importantly and least of all was it meant to be a secret from “the Russians, who occupied Dresden after the war” (ibid.). Here, Vonnegut edges in onto the truth of the matter, finally delivering the point. The reason why the firebombing of Dresden (and some other German cities at the same time) was to be kept a secret long after the war in spite of being “such a howling success” (245) in the eyes of the official multimillionaire historians and generals like Rumford has not so much to do just with the simple “fear that a lot of bleeding hearts ... might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do” (2009: 245) on the part of the US. It had to do with something else. It was, as Vonnegut reminds us, primarily part of a larger pattern, that is, a part of a larger geopolitical operation involving the imperial re-devision of the world, of which the crushing of people’s morale by means of blanket bombing, a strategy to be repeated later in Vietnam, was only one aspect of the whole story. The real purpose behind the firebombing of Dresden, as for example revealed by an internal Royal Airforce memo, was “to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do” and the same went for the atom bombing of Hiroshima (McKee, 1984: 46). The saturation bombing of Tokyo and especially the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima was

to ensure “the Japanese would surrender to the United States; not the Russians, and the United States would be the occupier of postwar Japan” (Zinn, 2005: 421). Historical records show that the atom-bombing of Hiroshima was “the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia” (ibid.) for in the end Western capitalist powers with the US now at the helm were united in their stance to neutralize and vanquish the Soviet Union, fearing socialism and its spread across Europe and their colonies.

The spread of socialism was bound to give rise to secessionist movements in the Western Allies’ former and new colonies seeking not only political but economic independence from their colonial masters, as proven later in Vietnam (Chomsky, 2012: 14-15). Vonnegut draws attention to this actual geopolitical state of affairs and hence to the actual significance of WWII as an imperialist war in what at first sight seems to be only one of many secondary and fleeting scenes having to do with uncontrolled ramblings of shell-shocked Billy Pilgrim. Prior to the bombing of Dresden, he recalls encountering an American high-ranking Nazi military officer, who is after recruiting American POWs to fight on the Russian front as part of the Nazi military machine. He is the one to remind them: “You’re going to have to fight communists sooner or later, [...] why not get it over with now?” (2009: 208). The saturation bombing of the cities like Dresden and Tokyo and the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after these imperial centres were virtually already defeated, was part and parcel of the demonstration of the Western capitalist block’s power<sup>6</sup> and a testing ground for what was yet to befall the Soviet Union. The atom-bombing of Hiroshima, as recently declassified documents show, was supposedly an overture to a plan that involved dropping 204 atomic bombs on the cities across the Soviet Union, annihilating or “wip[ing] it off the map” completely (Chossudovsky, 2017: n. pag.). In his speech that followed the dropping of the atom bomb on Nagasaki, President Truman declared the development of the bomb by the US a matter of god’s providence with God guiding

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<sup>6</sup> One of the crucial sections of President Truman’s speech, which followed the bombing of Hiroshima and which *Slaughter-house-five* carries nearly in full, reads: “With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces.” (Vonnegut, 2009: 237)

the US in its future use and disposal, supposedly as a part of its noble mission to “secure and stabilize world peace” (ibid.). In diplomatic parlance, this of course reads as securing our geopolitical economic interests against other imperial rivals while ensuring the obliteration of social justice movements as the common enemy of all imperial capitalist powers.

### **Dismantling the mantra of WWII as a good war**

*Slaughterhouse-five* helps to put into perspective that saving lives is way off the agenda despite US-led Western powers’ nominal declarations to the contrary. *Slaughterhouse-five* subjects the official justification of the firebombing of Dresden as a way of saving lives to merciless scrutiny, presenting it as a travesty. As history reminds us, even the U. S. Strategic Bombing Survey admitted as much that “Hiroshima and Nagasaki were chosen as targets not as a result of being important military bases” (Zinn, 2005: 424; Vonnegut, 2009: 237), as claimed by President Truman in his public address to the nation and which the novel resurfaces, but “because of their concentration of activities and population” (Zinn, 2005: 424). Blanket bombings of the population rather than the targeting of military installations do not save but deliberately destroy human lives, a pattern that was to be repeated during the napalm bombing of Vietnam as part of the so-called awe and terror campaign in order to undermine people’s support for the country’s revolutionary independence movement. When this “idea” or official explanation for the bombing of Dresden is introduced for the first time in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse*, it is already ironically embedded in order to be further examined and disproven so that by the second time it re-emerges again, this time as a part of Truman’s speech, it is undercut completely. The last section of the President’s speech which the novel reproduces in full refers directly to Japan while functioning as an undisguised threat to the Soviet Union: “We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise that have ... Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan’s power to make war. It was to spare—” (Vonnegut, 2009: 238). To this abruptly interrupted speech, which should end with the phrase “to spare human lives”, Vonnegut goes on to add his own phrase “And so on”, which serves both as an ironic dismissal and as a sobering moment. Vonnegut does not allow Truman’s speech to end on the note of

saving human lives for this would result in the delivery and reiteration of blatant non-truth. The phrase instead is cut off at the pivotal point, leaving it hanging in the air, which now in turn demands attention and comprehension. With the crucial part of the phrase left suspended in the air and threatening to collapse inward, the talk of just and moral war is disclosed and dismissed as a dangerously misleading propaganda, which should finally arouse suspicion and a dawning comprehension about the real nature of WWII, the role of the US and the geopolitical agenda pursued on the part of the allied forces.

In *Slaughterhouse-five*, the mantra of WWII as a good war waged on the part of US-led Western powers, supposedly out of their concern for the fate of humanity, rather than being in fact an imperial war, is further undermined through constant references to racist policies and evocations of their effects. These are shown to define the social fabric of both Nazi Germany and the US, informing also the latter's policies at home and its treatment of colonial subjects abroad. It is no coincidence that in the novel American race riots of the 1960s, which followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, function as a structural link between Pilgrim's re-living of WWII and his Vietnam-marked current reality as part of the same continuum. Thus once again initially perceiving himself to be "simultaneously on foot in Germany in 1944 and riding his Cadillac in 1967 [while] on his way to a Lions Club luncheon meeting" (Vonnegut, 2009: 74), Billy Pilgrim finds himself "in the middle of Ilium's black ghetto" (2009: 75). Its residents have recently burnt it down out of desperation and as a sign of a helpless protest against racist segregationist policies. Billy goes on to notice that "the neighborhood reminded him of the towns he had seen in the war. The curbs and sidewalks were crushed in many places, showing where the National Guard tanks and half-tracks had been" (2009: 75). This scene of utter devastation and violence visited upon a people to keep them in their allotted, secondary place transplants us to another one Billy Pilgrim witnesses in Dresden where "he saw a Pole hanged in the public. [...] The Pole was a farm labourer who was being hanged for having had sexual intercourse with a German woman." (2009: 198). This scene ends up serving also as a sinister reminder of legally sanctioned lynchings of African-Americans for the same racially invented transgressions in the US, a practice that was still in existence in some parts of the US as

late as in the 1960s, and of the eugenics policies the US itself pursued during WWII and well into the 1960s. The latter, for example, led to coerced sterilizations of those the US Anglo-Saxon elites considered racially “unfit”, which included not only African-Americans but also a newly racialized group of Latin Americans. The construct or in official terms, the “idea”, as the government’s naturalization of this ideology went at the time and which Vonnegut exposes and mocks, was “to encourage the reproduction of the “fit” and restricting the procreation of the “unfit.” (Stern, 2016: n. pag.). This was a common denominator of the racially motivated eugenics and population programs pursued simultaneously both in Nazi Germany and the US. During WWII, this kind of racial segregation and division of people into the two exclusionary categories of deserving and undeserving ones, humans and non-humans, was also the operating principle of the American “liberating” army (but of course not that of the Soviets). History records show that “Red Cross, with government approval, separated the blood donations of black and white” while African-American soldiers were to be kept separated from white American soldiers on compounds and even on board of combat ships, with the US’s “armed forces” thus being effectively “segregated by race” (Zinn, 2005: 415).<sup>7</sup> The hanging of the Polish labourer Billy Pilgrim witnesses – and whom the Nazi racist machinery categorizes as a subhuman and therefore as one with the rest of the natural resources of the Slavic countries to be occupied and made use of – serves as a sinister reminder of the very same racist policies informing Billy Pilgrim’s American past as a US civilian and soldier as well as his present reality. WWII thus feeds directly into the Vietnam war and vice versa, which explicitly reinforces its status as an imperialist war rather than a morally driven good war. For the racist degradation and objectification of the Vietnamese as “little yellow people” and

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<sup>7</sup> This understanding of the actual state of affairs would find its place in a number of protest rallies against the American involvement in WWII staged by African-American local resistance groups. Critiques were damning and minutely precise: “The Army jim-crows us. The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. The Red Cross refuses our blood. Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disenfranchised, jim-crowed, spat upon. What more could Hitler do than that?” (Zinn, 2005: 419). Members of these groups would often rally under the banner first evoked as a part of a poem published in one of their own papers: “I do not fear Germans or Japs; My fears are here. America!” (ibid.).



“Commi Gooks”, whom American soldiers were trained to perceive as “subhumans” and as “deserving to be killed” indiscriminately (Kohls, 2018: n. pag.), would serve as a template for exonerating soldiers from mass crimes committed against civilians and as one of the rationales for their participation in the war. After all, as the rationale based on a racial slur went at the time, they were only fighting “Commi Gooks” (ibid.).

By also gradually bringing in the Vietnam war and intertwining it with the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima, *Slaughterhouse-five* entrenches the devastating critique of WWII as an imperial war rather than a morally driven, good war waged on the part of the Western Allies, thus reinforcing the point that this was the war the US elites entered into in order to establish and secure their global hegemony. Or, as pointed out by Jarvis, WWII “positioned the U. S. as a global superpower” (2003: 96), a fact which eventually also led to the attempted occupation of Vietnam and subjugation of the Vietnamese resistance movement. Thus, by first invoking the firebombing of Dresden, the novel simultaneously draws attention to the blanket bombing of the North Vietnam and the napalm burning of the vast stretches of the Vietnamese countryside, which resulted in the incineration of local inhabitants and their food supplies. In between, it places the American race riots and police raids of the 1960s, foregrounding a specific kind of war complementary to that of the invasion of Vietnam which the US elites at the time conducted on their domestic turf. In both of the latter cases, the protagonist of the novel, along with the reader, cannot help but notice that the nature and scale of destruction is eerily equivalent to the kind Billy Pilgrim has witnessed in Dresden. All three places look, as also noticed by Jarvis, “like the surface of the moon” (2003: 99).

The Vietnam war comes to be depicted as an extension of the US imperialist policies pursued during WWII and part of a scramble for the control and ownership of the natural resources in the South Asian basin. Already back in 1953, a study by the Congress established that Indochina was “immensely wealthy in rice, rubber, coal and iron ore” while “[i]ts position makes it a strategic key to the rest of Southeast Asia” (Zinn, 2005: 269). Later, in 1961, the Kennedy administration was well aware, as put by one of its senior advisers, that “this part of Asia” was “one of the Earth’s crucial resource regions” and that “if Vietnam goes,

it will be exceedingly difficult to hold Southeast Asia.” (Quinn, 2018: n. pag.). That is why, when the communist-led resistance movement ousted Japanese occupiers in 1945 and the French tried to move back in to reclaim their former colony, France ended up being heavily supported by the US. In order to prevent the advancement of the communist-led resistance movement that was not only about political but also economic independence and self-management of the country, the US, already engaged in the division of Korea, ended up “financing 80% of the French war effort” (Zinn, 2005: 471). But with France finally losing the war, the US moved in. At this historical point, the novel goes on to intertwine the firebombing of Dresden and its crater-like appearance with the very same kind and scale of destruction that was to be wreaked upon the whole of Vietnam should it continue to resist the American occupation. This is a strategy feverishly promoted in a keynote speech by a military officer that Billy Pilgrim hears at his Lions Club: “He said that Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries [...]. He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason.” (Vonnegut, 2009: 76). As observed by Jarvis in her own discussion of *Slaughterhouse-five*, the keynote speaker that Billy Pilgrim hears is none other than “a thinly disguised Curtis LeMay, the general and the commander of the Air Force” who actually declared and stood behind the plan that “the US should bomb the North Vietnamese ‘back to the Stone Age’” (2003: 99). Moreover, he was one of the highest ranking military figures directly responsible for the introduction of incendiaries and for the firebombing of Dresden and atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and finally for the blanket bombing and napalm bombing of Vietnam. According to Jarvis, “the LeMay figure embodies continuities between World War II and Vietnam” for it was precisely due to the so-called “strategic ‘innovations’ like Lemay’s” that the number of civilian deaths escalated from “forty-four war deaths in World War II “ up to mind-blowing “ninety-one percent of war related fatalities in Vietnam” (2003: 100). By bringing together the moon-like surfaces of Dresden and those of the then contemporary Vietnam, the novel helps to put into perspective the socio-political

parallels between WWII and the Vietnam, which attest to a continuing pattern of US-led imperial wars.

Billy Pilgrim, an ophthalmologist by profession who should be in the business of correcting people's vision, fails in his mission to do so. Instead of speaking up against the warmongering he witnesses at the rich men's club, he keeps silent. He is "not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, [and does] not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do" (Vonnegut, 2009: 76). Instead, he is "simply having lunch with the Lions Club, of which he [now himself a rich man] was past president" (ibid.). Billy Pilgrim does not protest the firebombing of Vietnam, thus failing also in retrospect to protest the firebombing of Dresden, adopting instead the defeatist "so-it-goes" stance. Vonnegut, however, does not. While Billy Pilgrim endorses the US role in WWII and in the wars to follow by falling silent, Vonnegut refuses to do so. And, in doing so, he refuses to have his authorial voice censured and stifled. The novel he writes does not excel in the glamorization of WWII and the US-led allies' role in it but offers instead its own pair of corrective lenses.

## **Conclusion**

In the first chapter of the novel that functions as an authorial preface, the narrator sees himself as following in the footsteps of Lot's nameless wife. She was the only one who refused to avert her gaze from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah even though she was explicitly "told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been" prior to their destruction (Vonnegut, 2009: 28). As a punishment for ignoring the orders and daring to look, she is turned into a pillar of salt. Like Lot's anonymous wife, Vonnegut also risks ostracism by daring to look the official history of the US and its role in WWII in the eye and by daring, in the process, to come up with a testimonial novel that is not only written against the grain but is meant to function as "corrective lenses" (McGinnis, 2011: 149). By questioning the official interpretations of the history of the American empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by inciting the reader to examine closely the role and the interests of the US during WWII, the novel necessarily challenges the canonized narratives that have traditionally glorified or at least romanticized the

involvement of the US in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In doing so, it exposes WWII as a Western imperialist war. It is for this reason that Vonnegut, as he himself admits, consciously parts with the conventional role of “a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations” (2009: 6), which also require an unproblematic resolution. By adopting the position of Lot’s anonymous wife instead, Vonnegut wants us to look back and finally see not only the past but the way it inevitably “coexists with the present instant” (Parshall, 1987: 52). In this way, *Slaughterhouse-five* serves as a “relayer of knowledge” not found in official history books of Western imperial centres. It functions as a set of both corrective and magnifying glasses, as a “catalyst” (Rigney, 2009: 22) that has put Dresden back into historical picture and as a piece of “critical rewriting” (2009: 23) of WWII as the mother of imperial wars that put in place the 20<sup>th</sup>-century as the century of American hegemony.

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