Reply to Smith

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I thank Steve Smith for his characteristically thoughtful and shrewd comments on my piece. And I am glad to note that he finds himself 'in broad agreement' with what I wrote.

But here it is a matter of points of divergence. The first of these relates to the significance of ideology in explaining the explosion of violence in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. We agree that the First World War was the crucible in the production of this violence. We also concur in seeing violence towards non-combatants now legitimised in the war as never before. Though, of course, I was far from proposing a monocausal explanation for the soaring violence towards civilians that the war brought, I saw an ideological dimension as indispensable to explaining the new portrayal of entire peoples or ethnic groups as 'the enemy', and it seemed to me that ideological currents already in existence before the war could not be ignored. So I briefly looked back on the emergence of ideologies of integral nationalism blended with popular sovereignty, colonial domination and class warfare in the later nineteenth century, not, of course, to find the cause of the First World War, but to help to explain the character of the violence towards civilian populations that took place during, but especially, after that war – leading to the full incorporation of civilian populations in the mass slaughter of the Second World War. Smith, by contrast, places his emphasis on technologies of mass destruction and state policies in conducting the war. The critical importance of these is self-evident. Probably I should have given them greater weight. But I would not have stressed them to the exclusion of ideology. In fact, I wonder, when I was looking for an ideological component to help explain the changing character of war, whether was this so far away from Smith's inclusion of 'new discursive constructs' used by the belligerent powers – including 'total war', 'total annihilation', 'final solutions', and 'extermination of class enemies'. And did these 'constructs' come out of thin air?

When we turn to the Russian civil war, we are again dealing with different emphases rather than fundamental disagreement. As Smith points out, there were some similarities with earlier civil wars. It was not 'total war'; many died of disease and hunger; there had been high casualties in the American Civil War and in the Mexican Revolution; and much violence stemmed from criminality and banditry (something which I had, in fact, mentioned). But what I was seeking to do was not to outline similarities with earlier civil wars, but to highlight what was different – and to look to links with the subsequent mega-violence under Stalin. I was content, therefore, to see Smith concurring 'that Lenin's advocacy of Red Terror was a significant cause of the horrific violence', and that 'his chilling calls for the ruthless extermination of class enemies clearly adumbrate those of high Stalinism'. He is, of course, entirely right to point out that the extreme violence perpetrated by

Whites, too, was ideologically rooted in their notions of Judeo–Bolshevik conspiracy. I thought this was implicit in my remarks on the mass slaughter of Jews 'now commonly seen as the agents of Bolshevism'. But perhaps I ought to have made it explicit.

The second consideration in my paper was the propensity of states to engage in large-scale political violence. Smith finds my model 'broadly persuasive'. The model was meant to apply – something Smith queries – to the period spanning the two world wars. A number of points in the model (such as the experience of defeat and national humiliation at the end of the First World War) make the intention plain. However, on an abstract level it seems clear that some of the features I specify – such as the absence of a long-established pluralist democratic political culture, contested state legitimacy and ethnic-nationalist conflict over power and resources in disputed territories – have more general application. Smith goes on, quite correctly, to point to the distinction to be drawn between the violence of states towards their own citizens and towards citizens of other states. Here we are back to ideologies which underpin contrasting political utopias. While the Soviet Union turned its violence predominantly on its own people in rooting out 'class enemies' to construct its form of socialist utopia, the Third Reich mainly exported its violence in pursuit of the Nazi racial utopia.

Smith raises two caveats to my model. He notes that the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism was sometimes blurred, pointing to the way in which Woodrow Wilson's liberal doctrine of national self-determination opened the door in practice for the exclusion of ethnic minorities in the successor states. But while Wilson's good intentions did, of course, have catastrophic consequences, I do not see how this blurs the distinction I was drawing. The ethnic violence in the successor states arose, after all, not from civic nationhood, but precisely from the types of exclusory, 'organic' nationalisms resting upon cultural–linguistic–ethnic identity that I was emphasising. He then uses the brutal expulsions of German minorities from Czechoslovakia and Poland in the aftermath of the Second World War to qualify the generalisation that states with a civic base to national identity tended not to discriminate against minorities. However, the unique circumstances prompting those expulsions, following the years of barely describable suffering by Czechs and Poles under cruel German occupation, make the example a difficult one from which to make general qualifications.

The second caveat, an important one, that an understanding of political violence in Europe cannot be divorced from the violence in colonial territories, also by democratic states, is one where there is no disagreement, and, in fact, picks up a point I myself made.

Coming to my third section, on the 'modernity' of twentieth-century political violence (which, as he says, I qualify in a number of ways), Smith expresses some doubts. He first asks whether pre-modern massacres of civilians were so different from modern ethnic cleansing, and whether the distinction between religion and ethnicity as the motivation for mass killing was as clear-cut as I suggested. These are good questions. Modernity, however we might define it, surely followed a jagged line

of development rather than a sharp break with what went before. Religious divides did help to shape a sense of ethnic identities before the modern era, and modern ethnic enmities often built upon much older religious animosities. Modern, biological antisemitism drawing upon, but differing from, age-old Christian antagonism towards Jews is an obvious example. Persecution of Jews in the twentieth century often contained archaisms – attacking Jews as 'Christ killers', for instance. An earlier precursor, the Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and the following years, used on the other hand – I think for the first time in history – the notion of 'blood cleansing' to separate Jews from Christians, blending therefore race and religion – although it is worth mentioning that the initial intention of the Spanish rulers had been forced conversion, a distinctly pre-modern sentiment. So Smith is right to say that the distinctions between religion and ethnicity in the pre-modern era were less than hard and fast. Even so, the general argument, I would contend, still holds. Those perpetrating mass slaughter in the early modern period acted from a variety of motives. But ethnic cleansing was seldom, if ever, the prime one. This even applies, so far as I can judge, to the widespread atrocities of the Spanish conquistadors in central and southern America. By the nineteenth century, unless I am much mistaken, things had significantly changed. The white settler communities in Australia and North America now legitimated – at times quite openly – their land-grabbing and murderous 'cleansing' of the indigenous peoples on grounds of race. Their nascent forms of democracy and popular sovereignty ruled out the inclusion of the native populations on grounds of ethnic exclusivity. I see this as modern (and certainly did not mean to imply in my paper that 'modernity' is confined to the twentieth century).

My point – and as Smith mentions, it owes something to Zygmunt Bauman and a great deal to Michael Mann – was that the ethnic cleansing (sometimes merging into all-out genocide) of the modern era was different in kind as well as in scale from the mass killing of earlier eras. The mass slaughter, which reached its awesome peak in the first half of the twentieth century, was now frequently, perhaps normally, underpinned by secular ideology and carried out under the aegis of a powerful state. I singled out, following Mann, organic nationalism as the most common (though not the sole) murderous ideology. But I also, as Smith notes (and I do not see the contradiction in this that he implies), stressed the mega-killing legitimated by the contrasting 'utopian' ideologies under Hitler and Stalin – mercifully the exception, not the norm.

My paper concerned Europe, though admittedly the European continent in the twentieth century cannot be seen in detachment from the rest of the world, and I tried not to treat it as such. It is surely incontrovertible that the forty years after 1950 were extraordinarily pacific in Europe compared with the preceding decades. Smith accepts that 'the general point is indisputable'. But he thinks I might have exaggerated the contrast. Most of the examples he adduces (beyond those I had mentioned myself) relate, however, to regions or countries outside Europe – even though he is, of course, right to see a European dimension to the wars of liberation from colonial rule. I had, in fact, stated myself that 'in other parts of the world, the

second half of the twentieth century could hardly be described as benign' and listed some areas where political violence was 'endemic and huge in scale'. Smith 'baulks' at my description of the post-war decades within much of Europe as 'unbelievably benign' after 1950. I thought I was simply stating the obvious, in comparison with the horrors of 1914–50, and making an objective point. Smith's point is subjective : 'it didn't always feel like that'. Of course, it is true that the threat of nuclear Armageddon was omnipresent. But my own acute fears were confined to no more than a few days during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The present post-cold-war 'Al Qaida era' seems far more scary to me. So on subjective feelings about the 'benign decades', we shall just have to differ.

Smith concluded with some interesting reflections on the concept of political violence. His main concern is with an approach directed at intentions and motivations of 'actors' (not just individuals, but states, parties and other groupings contending for power). Not enough attention is paid, in his view, to acts emanating from 'the impersonal logic of war', from 'structures of inequality and injustice', or from 'sins of omission' not commission. I have struggled in a good deal of my historical writing with issues of reconciling 'intention' and 'structure', or agency and impersonal determinants. As is well known, I have had, and still have, much sympathy with structuralist accounts. But, in my own field, recent historiography has to my mind made progress by reintegrating agency into process. This is notably the case in the recent historiography of the Holocaust. I naturally accept readily (and hope I'm not guilty of it) the naivity of ignoring impersonal 'structural' forces – quite especially the dynamic of wars – in looking to pin everything on a single identifiable individual, or even wider agency. But I can't envisage persuasive explanations of the explosion of mass violence in modern Europe which systematically overlook or play down human agency, often of course in institutionalised or collective form as states, parties, armies or paramilitary organisations. I doubt whether Smith wants to go that far. But if we use concepts, sharper rather than more diffused definitions tend to be most helpful. So while it may well be fair to adjudge European governments 'grossly culpable for their failure to take action to end the grinding poverty and staggering inequalities of the world', I don't think that it makes much sense to include such omissions within an operable definition of political violence.

Overall, my impression is that we agree more than we disagree. Whatever, I certainly learned a good deal from Steve Smith's perceptive and incisive comments, for which I am most grateful.