

‘Guided by a determination to find an exit from the loop of endlessly repeating atrocities, Mishra leads readers on a search for meaning in modern history’s most depraved episodes. This is a rare text: courageous and bracing, learned and ethical, rigorous and mind-expanding’

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‘This profoundly important book finds Mishra, one of our most intellectually astute and courageous writers, at the peak of his powers. His outrage is hard to ignore. But at the centre of this urgent work is a humane inquiry into what suffering can make us do, and he leaves us with the troubling question of what world we will find after Gaza’

Hisham Matar

‘A brilliant book, as thoughtful, scholarly and subtle as it is brave and original, *The World After Gaza* does what great writing is meant to do: to remind us of what it is to be human, to help us feel another’s pain, to reach out and make connections across the trenches of race, colour and religion’

William Dalrymple

‘With this utterly essential book, Pankaj Mishra has made a powerful contribution to the moral history of the world . . . If books have a role today in the elucidation of justice, then I believe *The World After Gaza* will prove to be as crucial to our own times as James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* was to his’

Andrew O’Hagan

‘We all owe Pankaj Mishra a debt for crafting eloquent,
urgent and undeniable words from the horrors we
are struggling to witness’

Afua Hirsch

‘In this urgent book, Mishra grapples with the inexplicable
spectacle of stone-faced Western elites ignoring, and indeed
justifying, the slaughter and starvation of Palestinians in
Gaza. Like the vast global majorities that recoil at these
horrors, Mishra reflects on the supposedly universal
consensus that emerged from the Holocaust, as well as
his own early sympathies for Israel, as he expounds on
the terrible toll of this passivity in the face of atrocity’

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‘Both a timeless and timely book, reading *The World
After Gaza* feels like engaging in an ongoing conversation
about the meaning of the Holocaust and colonialism
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‘An astute, humane and necessary intervention, opening
a path to the altered consciousness which has to be a
consequence of Israel’s war on Gaza’

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The World After Gaza

PANKAJ MISHRA

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To PalFest and JVP, two beacons

We, too, are so dazzled by power and money that we forget the fragility of our existence: we forget that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that outside the fence are the lords of death, and a little way off the train is waiting.

Primo Levi

If the solidarity of mankind is to be based on something more solid than the justified fear of man's demonic capabilities, if the new universal neighborhood of all countries is to result in something more promising than a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else, then a process of mutual understanding and progressing self-clarification on a gigantic scale must take place.

Hannah Arendt

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Prologue

Think of the vast amount of brutality, cruelty and lies which are able to spread over the civilized world. Do you really believe that a handful of ambitious and deluding men without conscience could have succeeded in unleashing all these evil spirits if their millions of followers did not share their guilt?

Sigmund Freud

On 19 April 1943, a few hundred young Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto took up whatever arms they could find and struck back at their Nazi persecutors. Most Jews in the ghetto had already been deported to extermination camps. The fighters were, as one of their leaders Marek Edelman recalled, seeking to salvage some dignity: ‘All it was about, finally, was our not letting them slaughter us when our turn came. It was only a choice as to the manner of dying.’

After a few desperate weeks, the resisters were overwhelmed. Most of them were killed. Some of those still alive on the last day of the uprising committed suicide in the command bunker as the Nazis pumped gas into

it; only a few managed to escape through sewer pipes. German soldiers then burned the ghetto, block by block, using flamethrowers to smoke out the survivors.

The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz later recalled hearing screams from the ghetto ‘on a beautiful quiet night, a country night in the outskirts of Warsaw’:

This screaming gave us goose pimples. They were the screams of thousands of people being murdered. It travelled through the silent spaces of the city from among a red glow of fires, under indifferent stars, into the benevolent silence of gardens in which plants laboriously emitted oxygen, the air was fragrant, and a man felt that it was good to be alive. There was something particularly cruel in this peace of the night, whose beauty and human crime struck the heart simultaneously. We did not look each other in the eye.

In a poem Milosz wrote in occupied Warsaw, ‘Campo dei Fiori’, he evokes the merry-go-round next to the ghetto’s wall, on which riders move skyward through the smoke of corpses, and whose jaunty tune drowns out the cries of agony and despair. Living in Berkeley, California, while the US military bombed and killed hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, an atrocity he compared to the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, Milosz again knew shameful complicity in extreme barbarity. ‘If we are capable of compassion and at the same time are

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powerless,' he wrote, 'then we live in a state of desperate exasperation.'

Israel's annihilation of Gaza, provisioned by Western democracies, inflicted this psychic ordeal for months on millions of people – involuntary witnesses to an act of political evil, who allowed themselves to occasionally think that it was good to be alive, and then heard the screams of a mother watching her daughter burn to death in yet another school bombed by Israel.

The Shoah scarred several Jewish generations; Jewish Israelis in 1948 experienced the birth of their nation state as a matter of life and death, and then again in 1967 and 1973 amid annihilationist rhetoric from their Arab enemies. For many Jews who have grown up with the knowledge that the Jewish population of Europe was almost entirely wiped out, for no reason other than it was Jewish, the world cannot but appear fragile. Among them, the massacres and hostage-taking in Israel on 7 October 2023 by Hamas and other Palestinian groups rekindled a fear of another Holocaust.

But it was clear from the start that the most fanatical Israeli leadership in history would not shrink from exploiting an omnipresent sense of violation, bereavement and horror. Israel's leaders claimed the right to self-defence against Hamas, but as Omer Bartov, a major historian of the Holocaust, recognised in August 2024, they sought from the very beginning 'to make the entire

Gaza Strip uninhabitable, and to debilitate its population to such a degree that it would either die out or seek all possible options to flee the territory'. Thus, for months after 7 October, billions of people beheld an extraordinary onslaught on Gaza whose victims, as Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, an Irish lawyer and South Africa's representative at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, put it, were 'broadcasting their own destruction in real time in the desperate, so far vain, hope that the world might do something'.

The world, or more specifically the West, didn't do anything. Behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, Marek Edelman was 'terribly afraid' that 'nobody in the world would notice a thing', and 'nothing, no message about us, would ever make it out'. This wasn't the case in Gaza, where victims foretold their death on digital media hours before they were executed, and their murderers breezily broadcast their deeds on TikTok. Yet the livestreamed liquidation of Gaza was daily obfuscated, if not denied, by the instruments of the West's military and cultural hegemony: from the leaders of the United States and United Kingdom attacking the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice to the *New York Times* editors instructing their staff, in an internal memo, to avoid the terms 'refugee camps', 'occupied territory' and 'ethnic cleansing'.

Every day came to be poisoned by the awareness that while we went about our lives hundreds of ordinary

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people were being murdered, or being forced to witness the murder of their children. Pleas from people in Gaza, often well-known writers and journalists, warning that they and their loved ones were about to be killed, followed by news of their killing, compounded the humiliation of physical and political incapacity. Those driven by the guilt of helpless implication to scan Joe Biden's face for some sign of mercy, some sign of an end to bloodletting, found an eerily smooth hardness, broken only by a nervous smirk when he blurted out Israeli lies that Palestinians had beheaded Jewish babies. Righteous hopes aroused by this or that United Nations resolution, frantic appeals from humanitarian NGOs, strictures from jurors at The Hague, and the last-minute replacement of Biden as presidential candidate, were brutally dashed.

By late 2024, many people living very far from Gaza's killing fields were feeling – at a remove, but feeling – that they had been dragged through an epic landscape of misery and failure, anguish and exhaustion. This might seem an exaggerated emotional toll among mere onlookers. But then the shock and outrage provoked when Picasso unveiled *Guernica*, with its horses and humans screaming while being murdered from the sky, was the effect of a single image from Gaza of a father holding the headless corpse of his child.

The war will eventually recede into the past, and time may flatten its towering pile of horrors. But signs of the calamity

will remain in Gaza for decades: in the injured bodies, the orphaned children, the rubble of its cities, the homeless peoples, and in the pervasive presence and consciousness of mass bereavement. And those who watched helplessly from afar the killing and maiming of tens of thousands on a narrow coastal strip, and witnessed, too, the applause or indifference of the powerful, will live with an inner wound, and a trauma that will not pass away for years.

The dispute over how to signify Israel's violence – legitimate self-defence, just war in tough urban conditions, or ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity – will never be settled. It is not difficult to recognise, however, in the constellation of Israel's moral and legal infractions signs of the ultimate atrocity: the frank and routine resolves from Israeli leaders to eradicate Gaza; their implicit sanction by a public opinion deploring inadequate retribution by the IDF in Gaza; their identification of victims with irreconcilable evil; the fact that most victims were entirely innocent, many of them women and children; the scale of the devastation, proportionally greater than achieved by the Allied bombing of Germany in the Second World War; the pace of the killings, filling up mass graves across Gaza, and their modes, sinisterly impersonal (reliant on AI algorithms), and personal (snipers shooting children in the head, often twice); the denial of access to food and medicine; the hot metal sticks inserted into the rectum of naked prisoners; the destruction of schools, universities, museums, churches, mosques and even cemeteries;

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the puerility of evil embodied by Israel Defense Forces soldiers dancing around in the lingerie of dead or fleeing Palestinian women; the popularity of such TikTok infotainment in Israel; and the careful execution of the journalists in Gaza documenting the annihilation of their own people.

Of course, the heartlessness accompanying an industrial-scale slaughter is not unprecedented. For decades now, the Shoah has set the standard of human evil. The extent to which people identify it as such and promise to do everything in their power to combat antisemitism serves, in the West, as the measure of their civilisation. But many consciences were perverted or deadened over the years European Jewry was obliterated. Much of Gentile Europe joined, often zealously, in the Nazi assault on Jews, and the news even of their mass murder was met with scepticism and indifference in the West, especially the United States. Reports of atrocities against Jews, George Orwell recorded as late as February 1944, ‘bounce off consciences like peas off a steel helmet’. Western leaders declined to admit large number of Jewish refugees for years after the revelation of Nazi crimes. Afterwards, Jewish suffering was ignored and suppressed. Meanwhile, West Germany, though far from being de-Nazified, received cheap absolution from Western powers while being enlisted into the Cold War against Soviet communism.

These events which took place in living memory

undermined the basic assumption of both religious traditions and the secular Enlightenment: that human beings have a fundamentally ‘moral’ nature. The corrosive suspicion that they don’t is now widespread. Many more people have closely witnessed death and mutilation, under regimes of callousness, timidity and censorship; they recognise with a shock that everything is possible, remembering past atrocities is no guarantee against repeating them in the present, and the foundations of international law and morality are not secure at all.

Much has happened in the world in recent years: natural catastrophes, financial breakdowns, political earthquakes, a global pandemic, and wars of conquest and vengeance. Yet no disaster compares to Gaza – nothing has left us with such an intolerable weight of grief, perplexity and bad conscience. Nothing has yielded so much shameful evidence of our lack of passion and indignation, narrowness of outlook and feebleness of thought. A whole generation of young people in the West was pushed into moral adulthood by the words and actions (and inaction) of its elders in politics and journalism, and forced to reckon, almost on its own, with acts of savagery aided by the world’s richest and most powerful democracies.

Biden’s stubborn malice and cruelty to the Palestinians was just one of many gruesome riddles presented by Western politicians and journalists. It would have been easy for Western leaders to withhold unconditional

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support to an extremist regime in Israel while also acknowledging the necessity of pursuing and bringing to justice those guilty of war crimes on 7 October. Why then did Biden repeatedly claim to have seen atrocity videos that do not exist? Why did Keir Starmer, a former human rights lawyer, assert that Israel has the right to ‘withhold power and water’ from Palestinians, and punish those in the Labour Party calling for a cease-fire? Why did Jürgen Habermas, the eloquent champion of the Western Enlightenment, leap to the defence of avowed ethnic cleansers? What made the *Atlantic*, one of the oldest periodicals in the United States, argue, after the murder of nearly eight thousand children in Gaza, that ‘it is possible to kill children legally’? What explains the recourse to the passive voice in the mainstream Western media while reporting Israeli atrocities, which made it harder to see who is doing what to whom, and under what circumstances (‘The lonely death of Gaza man with Down’s syndrome’ read the headline of a BBC report on Israeli soldiers unleashing an attack dog on a disabled Palestinian)? Why did American billionaires launch smear campaigns against protesters on college campuses, and help spur pitiless crackdowns on them? Why were academics and journalists sacked, artists and thinkers de-platformed, and young people barred from jobs, for appearing to defy a pro-Israel consensus? Why did the West, while defending and sheltering Ukrainians from a venomous assault, so pointedly exclude

Palestinians from the community of human obligation and responsibility?

The answers for many people around the world cannot but be tainted by a long-simmering racial bitterness. Palestine, as Orwell pointed out in 1945, is a ‘colour issue’. This is the way it was inevitably seen by Gandhi, who, though sympathetic to the demand for a Jewish homeland, pleaded with Zionist leaders not to resort to terrorism against Arabs. Almost all post-colonial nations refused to recognise the State of Israel. India, China and Indonesia were among the countries that in 1975 passed a United Nations General Assembly Resolution declaring Zionism to be ‘a form of racism and racial discrimination’. Unaddressed racial inequities weighed on Nelson Mandela when he said that South Africa’s freedom from apartheid is ‘incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians’. They can still provoke the NAACP, the large and very mainstream American civil rights group, to make a rare intervention in foreign policy: it joined major African American church leaders in asking Biden to end military assistance to Israel.

For decades now, the racial divide on Palestine has been manifested most strikingly in black–Jewish relations in the United States. In US congressional primaries in 2024, interest groups affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) spent more than \$25 million to defeat the Democratic representatives Jamaal