

## Introduction

**H**ow do we remember the Second World War now? Often it comes to us in famous photographs and movie scenes from those years. A sailor plants a kiss on a nurse in Times Square on V-J Day. Jennifer Jones runs tearfully alongside Robert Walker's train as it darkly leaves the station in David O. Selznick's home-front magnum opus of 1944, *Since You Went Away*. The photographs carve out a piece of time, the films unfold a short sequence of set-piece locomotion. The photojournalistic precision of an instant, the melodramatic crescendo of a tearful goodbye: these are the set-pieces wherein all that was held precious, special, could be locked and shown to future generations as a truth of the times. In those years the moment was the medium.

This book takes the power of the moment seriously, but not in ways we might expect for an account of the Second World War. It starts with Eisenstaedt's photograph, but it is mostly about other moments from those years. The photo-

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graphs and movie scenes you will find here are usually not so well known. A few are truly obscure. I have found these images sometimes by chance, and it is only my sensibility that has restored them to some reawakened life. I have chosen them because they feel to me like a disturbance on the surface of things, akin to what Roland Barthes describes as the *punctum* of a photograph—a piercing, wounding sensation without explanation—and because I believe (adapting Barthes to the practice of doing history) that the inexplicable wound is a means of coming into contact with the past. The trembling of these moments is maybe only so much personal projection, true, but then again it might be some breath of the past that has chosen me, or one of my students (I tell them to be aware of these moments), to be its host. Taken together, these moments do not provide an authoritative account but a patchwork of glimpses of that era. Yet in their ephemeral and random combination, brought together like a bouquet in my hand, they promise a recollection that is more sensuous, maybe more delightful and more mysterious, than an official history.

Maybe that is because this is a book about time on many levels. It is about the time between now and then, the current we will have to ride to get from here to there. It is also about the strange combination of then and now familiar to students of photography—the way a photograph brings a lost moment and person directly into our view, so that what *was* and what *is* coalesce in eerie combination. It is also about how each of the photographs and scenes I discuss conveys its own attitude about time. Some freeze it. Others suspend it. Some strive to be without it. Others nod and glance toward but utterly avoid the *terror* of time, the

infiniteness of death, while still others confront this slow rot with painful precision. Every moment unfolds with its own special temporal atmosphere. Remembering the war years means not only imagining particular moments but imagining the ecology of time—luxurious or nightmarish, sudden or suspended, narrow or infinite—within each one of them.

How does one write about these moments? This book tries to imagine a different way of writing history. The past emerges here in a scattershot of sound, like a radio dial turned from one end of the frequency to the other and back again, first fast, then slow, backward and forward. We hear less the honey of official slogans than the garbled eloquence of the hitherto unheard, the stitched sound of those who never got their say, whose stories this book sometimes tells. We hear too the beautiful tones of the famous, though in unaccustomed words. All have their moment, and sometimes the moments are so lyrically present that they hardly seem to be from the past. But in all cases there is no permanent coming to light and audibility, no sense of history as a preservation of the lost. Amid the gravelly crackling of the noise, whole worlds briefly appear, but the voices fall back to their corners, whorled in retreat. Moment to moment, the greeting of past and present is quick to come and go.

The historical writing that responds to these moments is as weightless as the moments themselves. Gravity is usually thought to be the historian's element, but butterfly-wing atmospherics slow-drawn in air are another form of historical recollection. Zephyrs provide the currents of displaced sensations, the lost and unlocked phantoms waiting to be written with as light a hand. The air becomes the medium

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for being borne along, being inspired, by what is not there. I cannot believe that the past could just blow away, and I have decided that the wind that's taken it is what I'll write my history with.

When it is truly carried away, historical writing is a kind of flying.