correspondents at large

Voltaire, War Correspondent at Large

DANIEL BREWER

ALTHOUGH THE EUROPEAN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY WAS LONG CALLED THE "AGE OF VOLTAIRE" (AT LEAST IN TEXTBOOKS), IT WAS ALSO AN age of war. Courts and cities were undergoing a progressive pacification, as Norbert Elias has argued, but elsewhere the "civilizing process" was more bellicose. To finance the expansionist wars of Louis XIV, whose reign ended in 1715, and those of Louis XV, including the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48) and the Seven Years' War (1756–63), the French state expended two-thirds of its revenues on war (Meyer 57). Despite the Anglomania that marked progressive intellectual and literary circles in France around mid-century, between 1689 and 1815 France and England were officially at war for sixty-two years, not including minor conflicts. Against this backdrop, the image of Voltaire is that of an unflagging pacifist. Standing for all wars, the fictional war between the Abares and the Bulgares in which the naive hero of Voltaire's *Candide* finds himself caught up is described by the text's narrator, in a bitingly ironic oxymoron, as "a heroic slaughter" (114). War for Voltaire represented yet another instance of infamous unreason, odious intolerance, and despicable evil. It was the collective, generalized form of the *l'infâme* ("the despicable"), against which he publicly and tirelessly railed. The phrase *écrasez l'infâme* ("crush the despicable"), appended to his letters beginning in the early 1760s, signified the Enlightenment project of rooting out error, superstition, and intolerance by means of reasoned argument, common sense, and often a healthy dose of sharp irony. Quickly becoming a battle cry, penned in condensed, symbolic form as "ÉCRLINF," the phrase had preserved all its caustic energy when, a century later, Friedrich Nietzsche inserted it throughout his *Ecco Homo*. Voltaire's attempts to stamp out this evil took local forms, such as the highly public letter-writing campaigns he mounted to spark indignation and obtain justice for the victims of intolerance, as in the causes célèbres involving the protestant Calas and Sirven families, the young chevalier de La Barre, and Lally-Tollendal.

Anticipating Émile Zola's *j'accuse* of a century later, Voltaire the proto-intellectual saw that achieving social justice involved engaging

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with and reshaping public opinion. *L'infâme* may have broken bodies, but it could be combatted with words. As Voltaire's correspondence shows, some fifteen thousand letters of which still exist, he did battle with *l'infâme* by transforming an instance of intolerance into an affaire, a cause célèbre in support of which he could appeal to well-known friends and correspondents, as well as to anonymous public opinion. To gain that support, private writing had to go public, and Voltaire had to become notorious. Through his writing he fashioned an effective public self, a performative persona whose ethical words were designed to bring about acts of justice. Besides the several works he wrote that were openly critical of intolerance, including *Traité sur la tolérance* and *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire was a canny master at promoting himself (his self, "Voltaire") to promote reform all the more effectively. How, then, will Voltaire take war to war?

But does he? The cardboard cutout of Voltaire the pacifist found in anthologies and other forms of non- or underreading simplifies things too comfortably. Before considering the Voltaire who in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, for instance, uses somberly pessimistic tones to paint the history of humankind as an endless story of wars and their destruction, we should not forget another Voltaire. It was the young Voltaire, seeking to make his way in the world and perhaps too quickly giving voice to values of courtly culture to do so, for whom wars were not a law of nature, brought about by brutish humanity or religious intolerance. Instead, they represented an occasion to demonstrate courage and perform acts of self-sacrifice. Voltaire praises (French) warriors in "Sur les malheurs du temps"; in his epic poem "La Henriade"; in *Le siècle de Louis XIV*, some fifteen chapters out of thirty-nine of which are devoted to military operations; and in "Le poème de Fontenoy," which sings the praises of the maréchal de Saxe's victory over Anglo-Hanoverian troops. Thus, early in his career Voltaire reflects what Jay Smith has called "a culture of merit" in the early modern period, a system in which self-sacrifice brought kingly recognition that was both tangible and symbolic. The philosophes will reconfigure this model of social self-identity, transforming the kingly gaze into the disembodied, imaginary one of a grateful humanity, as they attempt to define their value to the state and society at large.

This compromise with war would not last, and many events in Voltaire's story explain why it would be destabilized—such as the extensive postwar devastation Voltaire witnessed while in Prussia at the court of Frederick the Great; the cataclysmic Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which shook his faith and European consciousness more generally concerning either providential or natural goodness; or his harsh view of the Jesuits' theocratic regimes in Paraguay. I will highlight one event, occurring in 1745, when Voltaire was named royal historiographer, a position he held for five years. Voltaire proclaimed this nomination "a fine occasion," explaining that "the king's two military campaigns are worthy indeed of being sung but even more of being written" (Goulemot et al. 662).[1] Gaining access to military archives as royal historiographer and to military officers through the marquis d'Argenson, Voltaire, hailed as one of the first modern historians, marks a break by this distinction between the nationalistic, epic praising of war and a way of writing about war in a more historiographically familiar sense. At the same time, his call to write (of) war extends well beyond a purely methodological question of historiography, raising the question of the aesthetics of war. How can war, as well as ways of resisting it, be phrased? What is the rhetoric of Voltaire's rage?

In the article "Guerre" ("War") in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire rehearses a suite of arguments against war. The third-person argument of logic ceases at one point, replaced by a first-person lament of suffering. "Humanity, charity, modesty, temperance,

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gentleness, wisdom, piety—what will these become and what will they matter to me when a half-pound of lead shot from 600 feet shatters my body and I die at the age of twenty in unspeakable pain surrounded by five or six thousand others also dying . . . all for the so-called interests of someone we don't know?" Instead of merely speaking of war, Voltaire depicts it, relating it to a singular individual whose personal experience of war is that of suffering and disproportion, as if to say, "In that moment of inexpressible pain, I know of no common measure that can justify my suffering in the name of any universal value." The "we" invoked in the article appears to be defined negatively, a collective victim unable to comprehend the war being waged and the cause of suffering. Or can a measure of judgment be found in the sympathy that "we" readers might feel on reading this scene of suffering? As Albert Hirschman has shown, it was this sympathy that Adam Smith imagined could tame the violent passions, offering an affective foundation for peaceable social relations, a foundation that, as Lynn Festa argues, is more precarious than once thought when it is related to the contemporaneous phenomenon of colonial, capitalist expansion.

In 1766 the Académie Française established a prize for the best essay that would "present the advantage of peace, inspire horror of the ravages of war, and invite all nations to join together to ensure common tranquillity" (Guicciardi 527). Familiar themes were rehearsed in the essays, and Voltaire found some of the projects to be simply fantasies. Unable to imagine perpetual peace, attainable only by eradicating fanatical thinking, Voltaire remained without illusions. Even the ideal of cosmopolitanism—universal values implying the possibility of transcending the local, the particular, and the national—Voltaire saw as difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The cosmopolitan ideal may indeed transcend national borders, he admitted, but it remains rooted in a real system of exchanges between nations—intellectual, to be sure, but also political, social, and economic. In *Lettres philosophiques*, Voltaire praised the English model of commerce as a civilizing force promoting progress and freedom, a model the French would do well to emulate, he added. Yet he also came to understand clearly that the same national model of commerce was enmeshed in a tangled web of violence, exploitation, and war. The efforts at colonization he saw taking place were attempts less to civilize than to plunder. "We Europeans discovered America only to lay waste to it and to drench it in blood, in return for which we got cocoa, indigo, sugar," he writes in 1773 in *Fragments sur l'Inde* (2), echoing the incrimination of the slave in *Candide*, who lost a hand and a foot as punishment for having tried to escape—"This is the price paid for the sugar you eat in Europe" (152). Voltaire may have been indifferent to the colonial model in a geopolitical sense. France's loss of Canada following the Seven Years' War was that of "a few acres of snow" (167). In ethical terms, though, he vehemently denounced the economic enabling condition of colonialism: slavery. But did he take sugar with his cocoa?

In a provocative essay, Roland Barthes called Voltaire "the last of the happy writers," suggesting among other things that history had freed the eighteenth-century writer from certain constraints—socioeconomic and intellectual—but had not yet subjected the writer to intractable and alienating contradictions, which would soon become unavoidable. Voltaire's good fortune is that he can imagine himself a writer at large, someone to whom it has been delegated to represent all humanity rather than a division of it. Yet if Voltaire thinks of himself as humanity's spokesman, it is because he happily imagines himself at large in another sense—that is, liberated or free of confinement. Should Voltaire's fondness for sugar be denounced as a sign of complicity, his irony rendered powerless to protect him? Should the writer be hauled before the bar of

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history and justice, as Louis Sala-Molins has done with passionate anger? Perhaps, although the war waged, however just, against one fanaticism may always hide another, an inquisitional paradox Voltaire recognized so well.

Note

1. Unattributed translations are mine.

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