"Conscience, Violence and History": Interview with Annette Becker

Interview conducted by Hansong Li, compiled and translated into English by Paige Pendarvis

Professor Annette Becker, during her public lecture on Raphael Lemkin at Temple d'Issy Moulineaux in Paris, Nov. 25th, 2015
Courtesy of *The Chicago Journal of History*

Dr. Annette Becker is a French historian, professor at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense and a senior member at the Institut universitaire de France. Born into a family of scholars in 1953, she was first introduced to history by her father Jean-Jacques Becker and her aunt Annie Kriegel, both prominent intellectuals of the time. Author of such influential works as *Retrouver la guerre* (2000) and *Guillaume Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre* (2009, prix de la biographie de l'Académie Française, 2010), Professor Becker is known for her pioneering research on the Two World Wars and the experiences of violence. In recent years, she has studied extensively the history of genocide. In November, she delivered a public lecture on Raphael Lemkin and the birth of the concept of genocide, in which occasion she sat down with *Chicago Journal of History* to discuss, both as a historian and as a citizen, her interests, methods, and personal beliefs.

*Chicago Journal of History (***CJH**): Let's begin with your career as a historian: have you always been interested in war-related violence in your work, or have you explored other subjects? How were you inspired to begin studying the perceptions and the experiences of war?

Annette Becker (**AB**): Actually, my dissertation was about American history—specifically about the eighteenth century. I worked on the preachers of the "Great Awakening." And as you know, during the "Great Awakening", there was a lot of violence. So, I've always been interested in violence, but it was a little by chance that I came to World War I. Because I've always been passionate about war memorials, and it was because I was interested in this subject that a publisher asked me if I could do a book about war memorials—and so I said, it's strange because I'm an eighteenth century specialist, and I couldn't do those two things at once. But eventually, the book seemed interesting to some historians who specialized in the history of war, and so they told me "alright you must work with us." And that's how I changed specialties.

CJH: You often analyze images as historical sources: paintings, posters, photographs, etc. in an attempt to shed light on the experiences of men and women during war, like in your book "Voire la Grande Guerre", for example. What role do visuals sources play in your research?

AB: I have always used images. I think that we live in a world surrounded by images, where they are present everywhere. And because at the moment they are reproduced, and can thus be seen, we must use them! I did this when I worked on eighteenth century American history—I was already using images for that topic. For the twentieth century, we certainly have many more images, which was the case for photography, and also for cinema, so there were many more images, but the idea is the same: that to understand the people of the past, we must understand the ways in which they expressed themselves. We still often use writing, but as soon as we have things other than writing, as soon as we have images, as soon as we have sounds—we must use them too, because sound is another means of expression, and all expressions allow us to better understand what has happened in the past.

CJH: We most think about images that have been constructed in an ideological way, like propaganda, for example. According to you, what are the main differences between using literary and pictorial sources?

AB: Literary and pictorial sources can both equally be propaganda—there isn't any difference. All types of sources have to be studied in-depth in order to see where they come from, how they were created, and how they were perceived in the time in which they were used. That which is a written text or an "image text" can simply be two different ways of speaking. But the historian's method is the same, except that we must assume that we are capable of working with images, and we often don't think we're trained adequately enough to do that. But I teach that to my students, and I'm sure that they are certainly capable of working with both images and texts.

CJH: If we return to today's wars, it seems that there is no more large-scale global war, but rather we're facing something one could call an asymmetrical war, like terrorists attacks. Do you think that we are in a period in which the violence of war has transformed into an entirely different category?

AB: Actually, we experienced an evolution in the art of war throughout the twentieth century. World War I was a war with military targets, above all. In other words, an army fought against another army—all the men were in uniform. Regardless of how we understand this war, it was a war of adults in uniform. World War II also targeted armies in uniforms, but along with an increasing number of civilians. And after World War II, what has happened militarily is that there are very few soldiers who are now targeted by war, but more and more civilians. For example, America's reason for intervening in Serbia was not at all about soldiers, but rather about civilian victims. Terrorism is the extreme end of that because soldiers are not those being attacked, but only civilians, either as a specific target (for example, Islamic extremist terrorists have targeted Jews) or taken the entirety of a population as their target. And so we are now in a war that is no longer a war, because war consists of adults in uniform, fighting against each other. And with the uniform, there were still rules; now we are outside all rules.

CJH: Like what we saw in Paris last week?

AB: Yes, like what we saw in Paris last week.

CJH: A few words about Lemikin—the Polish legal scholar who invented the term "genocide"—whom you were speaking about this evening. He devoted the majority of his time to studying international law as a way to combat war crimes like genocide. In your opinion, does the true solution depend on geopolitics, or do you have confidence that international law can provide a solution? It's a large question.

AB: I've presented both positions, but now this is not the opinion of myself as a historian who cannot predict the future, but my opinion as a citizen. I think that from an international perspective, we ought to be strong enough in creating objectives to prevent assassination—as we no longer have wars, but rather assassinations—so that they should be impossible. Sometimes, we're able to unite good wills, which should happen, but I'm not very optimistic.

CJH: Is that to say that you don't have a positive opinion about the role international law has played in history as a force against violence?

AB: I think that international law—or rather the work of legal scholars who study international law—is very important because it allows us to become morally aware. The problem is the reality in which the law is played out. The law is less strong than the will to assassinate. But that's not to say that we must throw up our arms and give up, I am fundamentally Churchillian in the sense that, "democracy is the worst form of government with the exception of all the others."

CJH: Concerning your research about World War I, do you think that there is a difference between the historical approaches of the United States and of Europe?

AB: There is a small difference, I believe. American soldiers entered the war much later, in 1917, and other than that, they lost fewer men. Even if they lost a large number, with respect to the extraordinary losses of other countries, it was less devastating. But certainly, that does not prevent us from saying that their role in the war was so important that it was won because of them. And certainly, their role in the war was extremely important, but the way that Americans fall into war as necessity is much less important than in European societies and colonies.

CJH: Lastly, do you have any advice for our students in the United States? Particularly for American students who are specializing in the history of war?

AB: I think that to study conflicts so horrendous, one must consider the human person in the broadest way possible. To do this type of history, which is not the same as traditional types of history—like diplomatic, political, and so on, where there are so few people. To study the history of these conflicts, one has to try to fully understand what it means to be a human being. We are in the society that we study: how did it prefer war, violence, massacre, and assassination of social life at one moment? To understand that, we must use all the sources possible, all the broadest possible sources from which we may be able to understand that. I believe it's our fate and one must try to do this for their vocation.