

# In the Land of Burning Children

Aaron Bushnell in context

Margaret Killjoy

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Yesterday an active-duty Air Force soldier named Aaron Bushnell self-immolated in front of the Israeli Embassy. His last words were “Free Palestine.” Of the cops responding to the scene, some pointed guns at him while others sought to extinguish the flames; the image of a cop pointing a gun at a man on fire is the most American thing I have ever seen.

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On June 11th, 1963, a Buddhist monk named Thích Quảng Đức set himself on fire in Ho Chi Minh City (then Saigon). In South Vietnam, Buddhists were an oppressed majority, ruled by a Catholic minority—the Buddhist flag was banned, Catholics were chosen for all the better jobs, and protesting Buddhists were being murdered in the streets or sent to concentration camps.

So Thích set himself on fire and calmly burned in front of hundreds of spectators on a public street. There’s a film of it, and I’m not big into “watch people die on film,” but some moments in history are worth seeing. He didn’t cry out; he just sat in lotus position, engulfed in flames. Afterwards, the cops tried to take his remains, but thousands of angry protestors took him back, and they re-cremated him for a proper funeral. His heart didn’t burn. It solidified in the fire. Today it is today a sacred relic. I have no explanation for this.

Other monks in Vietnam followed his example. By the end of the year, the CIA led a coup and toppled the Catholic dictator of the country. This isn’t “the US being good,” mind you, they’d been propping the asshole up in the first place. Thích’s sacrifice is often credited as what brought down that regime.

Two years later, the first American set herself on fire in protest of the Vietnam war. Alice Herz was a German Jew, 82 years old. She’d seen some shit. She’d fought for feminism in 1910s Germany, helped bring about the Weimar Republic, fled Germany to France only to end up in a Nazi concentration camp. Survived. Made it to the US. Lived in Detroit and became a Unitarian. Then one day she wrote a letter about how horrible the Vietnam war was, went out to the street, and set herself on fire. She wasn’t the last. In South Vietnam and the US alike, Buddhists and Quakers and Catholics set themselves on fire in service of the same cause.

When a 16 year old Catholic named Ronald Brazee set himself on fire in October 1967, a Catholic Worker named Father Daniel Berrigan wrote a poem for him called “In the Land of Burning Children”

He was still living a month later  
I was able to gain access to him  
I smelled the odor  
Of burning flesh  
And I understood anew  
What I had seen in North Vietnam  
I felt that my senses  
Had been invaded in a new way  
I now understood  
the power of death in the modern world  
I knew I must speak and act  
against death  
because this boy’s death  
was being multiplied  
a thousandfold

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The Dutch resistance to the Nazi Occupation was characterized by a unique nonviolence, focusing primarily on hiding Jewish people and acts of sabotage. This wasn’t necessarily an ethical or even strategic decision, but one forced onto them by circumstance—according to one resistance fighter, since the Dutch government maintained a firearms registry before the invasion, the Nazis were able to acquire that list and go door-to-door to disarm the Dutch population.

But what the Dutch resistance lacked in firearms it made up for in mass participation. Roughly a million people were involved in sheltering people, secreting people away, striking, or helping those who were doing such things. The two most active groups were churches and communist organizations.

The Nazis responded with collective punishment. The occupiers cut off food supplies inside the Netherlands, blockading the roads between farms and cities. The entire population of the country went hungry during what’s called the Hunger Winter of 1944-1945. Between 18-22,000 people starved to death. Four-and-a-half million people were living off of something like 600 calories a day each. A whole generation of children born or living at the time suffered lifelong ailments. Audrey Hepburn grew up in Occupied Netherlands (and as a preteen performed ballet to raise money to support the resistance). Her time in the hunger winter left her with lifelong ailments like anemia.

In case the parallel I’m drawing is not obvious, Gaza is currently being starved by the Israeli government.

Quite notably, quite worth understanding in the modern context, the Hunger Winter persisted despite relief efforts until the Allied forces liberated the Netherlands from the fascists in May 1945.

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Aaron Bushnell was twenty-five years old when he died. He sent a message to media outlets before his act: “Today, I am planning to engage in an extreme act of protest against the genocide of the Palestinian people.”

He posted on Facebook: “Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”

His last words, engulfed in flames, were “Free Palestine.”

I know that what stopped US involvement in Vietnam was the military victory of the Vietnamese people against US forces, combined with the direct action efforts of the American Left that made the war harder to execute. I know what ended the Nazi occupation was the Allied invasion. I know what stopped legal chattel slavery in the US was the deadliest war in our country’s history. I also know that what stopped Jim Crow was... nothing. Nothing has stopped it, not completely. The long, hard, thankless work of a combination of reform and direct action has mitigated its effects somewhat.

I can’t say I think others should follow Aaron’s example. I doubt he wanted anyone to. An act like this needs attention, not imitation. What we can follow is the moral courage. What we need to decide for ourselves is *how* to act, not whether or not to act. I don’t have any answers for me, and I don’t have any answers for you.

I can say that he shouldn’t be forgotten, that he ought to be remembered when we ask ourselves if we have the courage to act.

I can also say that it takes an incredible number of people doing an incredible variety of work to effect change. That poet, Father Daniel Berrigan, did a lot more than write poetry. He and others in the broader Catholic Left raided draft offices and burned records, directly impacting the US’s ability to send young men off to die in an imperialist war. A group of people who came out of their movement (but were primarily Jewish and/or secular) raided an FBI office and uncovered the spying and disruption that was done of the peace movement under the name COINTELPRO.

A vibrant and militant counterculture sprang up, drawing Americans away from the clutches of conservative propaganda. They built nationwide networks of mutual aid and they helped draft dodgers escape the country.

An awful lot of American soldiers in Vietnam directly defected, enough that “fragging” entered the English language as a verb for throwing a grenade at your commanding officer.

As for the Hunger Winter, it was not ended until the Nazi party was ended through force of arms, but its worst effects were alleviated by the bravery and thankless work of uncountable people who cobbled together meals from nothing or who organized to bring food aid in across German lines.

In the US now we’re seeing a growing movement opposed to our country’s collaboration with the genocidal regime in Israel.

It’s impossible to know if it will be enough. When you pile straw onto the proverbial camel, you never know which straw will be the last. We just keep piling.

And in the meantime, we remember names like Aaron Bushnell, Ronald Brazee, Alice Herz, and Thích Quảng Đức.

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