

This chapter appears in a larger collection published by Berghahn Books (<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Stecher-HansenNordic>). Hamm, Christine. 2021. "Sigrid Undset's Problematic Propaganda – The Call for Democracy in Return to the Future". In: *Nordic war stories: World War II as History, Fiction, Media, and Memory*, ed. Marianne Stecher-Hansen. New York: Berghahn Books.

## **Sigrid Undset's Problematic Propaganda: The Call for Democracy in *Return to the Future***

### **Christine Hamm**

At the time of World War II and Norway's occupation on 9 April 1940, Sigrid Undset was the internationally best known Norwegian author besides Henrik Ibsen. She had been honored for her historical novels set in medieval Norway about Kristin Lavransdatter (1920-1922) and Olav Audunssøn (1925 and 1927) with the Noble prize of Literature, and her fiction was widely read in North America, Scandinavia and the German speaking countries. In addition, Undset was a sharp critic of Norwegian social life, and she published extensively in Norwegian newspapers. During the 1930ies, she had written many articles against Nazi Germany, criticizing, for instance, how doctors treated disabled children, and warning against the dangers of Nazi ideology.<sup>1</sup> As an outspoken intellectual and Nobel Laureate, Sigrid Undset was a "person of interest" to the occupying German forces. In the spring of 1940, Undset feared that the *Wehrmacht* would press her to give speeches on the radio, and that she might be forced to collaborate with Hitler's Germany in this manner. Therefore, it became necessary for her to flee occupied Norway.

One of the few books Sigrid Undset wrote after her escape carries the striking title *Return to the Future*. What does it mean? What is "the future" and from where is one supposed to return to it? The book, which was first published in the US by Alfred A. Knopf in 1942 (in English translation), contains Undset's personal memoir of her escape and her long journey to reach the United States in August of the same year. The structure of this "memoir"

follows the escape route the author took from Lillehammer to Northern Norway, and then through Sweden, Russia and Japan. The first four of the five chapters are titled accordingly, “Norway, spring 1940,” “Sweden, summer 1940,” “Fourteen days in Russia” and “Japan en passant,” as they each describe the situation in these countries at the time, and render Undset’s impressions. In the last chapter titled “Return to the future,” Undset has arrived in San Francisco and settled down in Brooklyn, New York. As it becomes clear, the future is however not America; for Undset, the future is a reborn, democratically governed Europe. The “return” will come when the occupied countries that have been put to ashes by the totalitarian German and Russian regimes rise up again in the future.

This chapter argues that Undset’s personal memoir about her journey from Norway to America is a clever piece of Allied propaganda. Undset wants her American audience to fight Germany and the Axis Powers and free her country.<sup>2</sup> She produces a picture of Norwegians that will appeal to Americans, alongside an enemy representation of Germans that will galvanize Allied sympathies. Fueled by the sorrow of her personal loss and her hatred towards the Nazi Germans and Soviet Russians, she appeals to the Allies to defeat the totalitarian regimes, partly using her enemies’ own rhetoric against them. She ironically contests the Nationalist Socialist ideology of “Blood and Soil,” and argues that the Norwegians, contrary to the Germans, have a right to own their country, because they have tilled the soil and fished the seas for centuries. She also shuns Hitler’s ideas of the Germanic “Master race,” depicting the Nordic people as fundamentally different from the Germans and, ironically, as morally and physically superior to any so-called “Aryan race.” Arguing from an essentialist position, Undset mimics the propaganda of the totalitarian regimes which she attacks and draws appalling pictures of the Nazi Germans, Soviet Russians and Imperial Japanese. Undset concludes *Return to the Future* by casting doubt on the idea that these countries will ever become democratic and peace-loving nations. Thus, Undset’s explicit agitation for freedom

and democracy is heavily undermined by her own hatred toward the Axis powers, which the Atlantic charter wants to destroy. As a propaganda narrative in the service of the Allied cause, *Return to the Future* is both energized and undermined by the author's passionate emotional engagement in her cause. The uncomfortable complexity of this piece of writing can explain why the book has received almost no academic interest during the last 50 years.

Considering the historical situation in 1941, Undset's appeal to American citizens to support the fight for a free Europe and underlying hatred toward Nazi Germany are understandable. As stated in the preface to the Norwegian edition *Tilbake til fremtiden*, which was published in Norway after the liberation in 1945, Undset wrote most of the text in the summer and fall of 1941, at the point in time when Nazi German troops had massively invaded Soviet Russia ("Operation Barbarossa" was carried out in late June 1941); England was suffering under German attacks from the *Luftwaffe*, and the US had begun to consider its entry into World War II (which occurred on 8 December 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor). Months earlier in the spring and summer of 1941, Undset impatiently wanted the Americans to join the British forces, and she longed to see Norway again as a free country. In fact, Undset's text closely interacts with the negotiations between United States President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and their mutual plans for the Atlantic region after the war. A major goal of Undset is to ensure a place for Norway in the future North Atlantic association.

A statement dealing with the goals of the Allied forces for the postwar world was pronounced 14 August 1941 in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, and called "The Atlantic Charter." *Return to the Future* questions whether it will be possible to realize the goals of the charter. Will the Allied nations (Great Britain, France and, later, USA and USSR) fighting the Axis powers (Germany, Japan and Italy) ever be able to establish freedom and democracy again? Will they be able to prevent the wish for territorial gains and to work for a world free

of fear? The first page of Undset's final chapter, titled "Return to the future," contains a clear call for the work for democracy. After the Americans have helped to defeat Nazi Germany, it will be necessary to

[...] rebuild health in nations where millions of people have been destroyed by undernourishment and naked starvation, by hatred and by abnormal living conditions, by inhuman and nerve-shattering experiences – where a generation of children has had the worst imaginable conditions in which to grow up during their formative years.<sup>3</sup>

(Undset 1942: 208)

It is Undset's explicit goal to support the strategies of the Allied forces in the West in order to build up again what she calls a "healthy" Europe. At the same time, Undset clearly understands that the suffering in the occupied European countries will produce hatred against Germany and that it will be a real challenge to get the European nations to live peacefully together again.

Undset's focus on the next generation is hardly surprising considering that she had been all her life dealing with questions concerning children's education and upbringing (Hamm 2013). The cultural role she gives to family life is visible throughout her entire authorship. In the famous speech on the Fourth Commandment, held for students in Trondheim in 1914, Undset argues for the rights of children, among these the right to inherit a culture from their parents. Only if parents live in such a way that children can grow up respecting them, will they become good citizens as well as good human beings (Undset 2004: 122-145). During the war, however, Undset was forced to witness a generation of children growing up without the benefit of cultural traditions.

Undset pursues two explicit goals when writing *Return to the Future*: To urge the United States to join the Allied cause in Europe; and, to ensure Norway a place in the North

Atlantic alliance. Her approach is strategic, since her goals were not as easy to achieve as it might seem today. As Undset discovered upon her arrival in San Francisco on 26 August 1940, the image of Norway at that time was not the favorable (Skouen 1982: 38). In fact, most Americans believed that the Norwegians had surrendered quickly to the German occupying forces, without any resistance. This image had been produced by an American foreign correspondent Leland Stowe, who happened to be in Oslo on the infamous date of 9 April 1940. However, it soon became clear to Undset, that Stowe did not speak Norwegian and had little idea about what had really gone on around him, since he had spent most of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April in the basement of the American Embassy.

Naturally, Stowe's misinformed reports were especially hurtful to Undset, since her eldest son Anders had been killed in battle during the first weeks of the German invasion, while desperately trying to defend Lillehammer with little weaponry. As biographer Sigrun Slapgard has documented, Undset was so provoked by Stowe's inaccurate reporting that she approached her publisher Alfred A. Knopf to inquire how she might rectify the reporting on Norway's resistance. Knopf urged her to write a book in order to "[...] render the facts and tell about her own escape and experience" (Slapgard 2007: 448).<sup>4</sup> In fact, during her stay in the United States, Sigrid Undset considered herself a "propaganda soldier" (Slapgard 2010: 29), fighting for Norway's cause by giving talks (mostly at universities and Scandinavian association meetings, but also speaking for radio broadcasts on WNYC in Manhattan), giving press interviews and writing articles as well as her memoir about the escape from Norway.<sup>5</sup> In *Return to the Future*, however, Undset not only tried to render a true picture of the German invasion and Norwegian resistance to her American readers, but produces a narrative which argues for the necessity of fighting all forms of totalitarianism without mercy. The author accomplishes this by turning the ideological propaganda of totalitarian regimes against them,

using both irony, parody and inversion as rhetorical devices. The following analysis will demonstrate Undset's subversive narrative strategy.

### **Norwegian memories: The National Romantic Narrative and the melodramatic mode**

The first chapter of Undset's memoir ("Norway, Spring 1940) opens with a national romantic perspective on the symbiotic relationship between the Norwegian landscape and Norwegian people. The author maintains that the Norwegians are peace-loving because they had to concentrate for centuries on clearing their land of stones. Invoking Ivar Aasen's famous poem "Nordmannen" (The Norwegian)<sup>6</sup> she informs her American readers that the Norwegians were so busy working their soil, which was covered with rocks and stone, that they had no time for war, and did not dream of gaining more territory. Drawing on the idea of a nation's essential soul as produced by history and culture, Undset consciously counters the biologically-based racism of Nazi ideology. According to Undset's argumentation, Norwegians were not born 'strong and morally superior,' but had become so over the centuries due to the farmers' and fishermen's struggle for life in harsh natural surroundings.<sup>7</sup> Contesting the blood-and soil-ideology of the German Nationalist Socialists in this way, Undset claims that the Norwegians "earned" their country, and therefore the Germans had no right to it whatsoever. Furthermore, the Norwegians were ready to defend their Norway – even at impossible odds:

We Norwegians had become a peaceful people. [...] And we are only about three million people – about as many as live in Brooklyn – to work and administer this country from which it is so difficult and heavy a task to win a living. (Undset 1942: 5-6)<sup>8</sup>

Undset continues that three million Norwegian citizen were taken by surprise when the Germany occupied the country on 9 April 1940. She describes in detail how she spent the

morning of 7 April in Oslo, giving a speech to Norwegian students, and attending the theatre and a dinner. She recalls how her Finnish foster children (child war refugees from the Winter War in Finland) awaited her at her return to Lillehammer. Finally, she mentions how quickly her own son Anders decides that he has to defend his country although it seems quite hopeless, and that her younger son Hans joined the Medical Corps by bicycle. In this way Undset initially employs the genre of the memoir in order to establish herself as a reliable narrator as well as a kind and engaging person.

Undset's narrative strategy in the first chapter of *Return to the Future* is a mixture of the memoir with an essentialist depiction of a hardworking and peace-loving people formed by the harsh and beautiful nature and climate of Norway. However, at closer inspection, Undset's admirable picture of the Norwegian people as healthy and morally superior, may strike the modern reader as exaggerated and even ridiculous. For instance, *all* Germans in Undset's book only think of enriching themselves during their stay in Norway, and *all* Norwegians are helpful and understanding. Using a melodramatic mode of excess, Undset appeals to her reader's emotions and turns her descriptions of various people into a simple, dramatic contrast between good and evil.

In *Return to the Future*, Norwegians are generally depicted as self-controlled, well-behaving and kind, and Undset portrays the entire country as if it were one breathing and living body. At one point, Undset is transported by a little sailing ship from Åndalsnes heading for Narvik. She stresses the community between Norwegians by telling about their almost wordless attunement: Although the little group of refugees has no leader, they seemingly always find out about what to do together (“[W]e kept far out to sea, and in the early morning we lay in at the harbor of the farthest lighthouse,” Undset 1942: 42).<sup>9</sup> In a subtle way, Undset creates the impression that she is participating in steering the boat, since she talks about the way of sailing in such a familiar and competent way. When it turns out that

the group of refugees cannot pursue their journey by boat, because it is too dangerous to sail through the fjords further north, they are helped to escape by ski. Due to her poor physical condition and her heavy body, Undset could not perform the trip herself, but was pulled on a sledge to Sweden by a couple of young men. But she nevertheless manages to include herself into the picture of the typical Norwegian by repeatedly talking of “we Norwegians”. And the Norwegians are portrayed not only as helpful, but also as smart, strong and healthy.

In contrast to the healthy Norwegians, the Nazi German soldiers are described as ugly and physically unfit for battle, and wearing spectacles: “[...] there were an unbelievable number of bowlegged, narrow-shouldered, flat-footed individuals, with broad, dropping bottoms [...] it naturally seemed very remarkable that so many wore glasses.” In Norway, Undset claims, one hardly sees younger people with spectacles. (Undset 1942: 78)<sup>10</sup> Obviously parodying the Nationalist Socialist propaganda of the Germanic race’s “magnificent physique” (Undset 1942: 78), Undset depicts the Norwegian people as physically fit and morally superior and thus distinguishes them from the “ugly” German soldiers, whose self-proclaimed superiority as a “master race” (*Herrensfolk*) is ridiculed.

In the second chapter (“Sweden, summer 1940”), Undset relates how she is forced to wait in Stockholm for her son Hans after having successfully escaped Norway. Finally united, mother and son must accept that Norway was an occupied country, and that they must find a way to reach the United States, which had earlier extended an invitation to the author. Staying with her Swedish colleague, the writer Alice Lyttkens, Undset observes that all her Swedish friends are resolutely against the Nazis. Neutral Sweden was reluctant to accept a transit agreement with Germany, which allows German soldiers to travel by rail through Sweden to occupied Norway or to the Finnish front. Further, most of the Swedish population lives in a state of uneasiness, Undset claims, because they cannot feel safe from attack by the great warring powers, either by the USSR or by Nazi Germany. Although she considers Sweden



among the democratic nations, Undset nevertheless cannot refrain from criticizing Sweden's wish to remain neutral and expresses scorn for the childish effort to seek revenge on the Germans by allowing their houses to remain unpainted as a passive act of protest.

### **Life in totalitarian Russia and Japan: A travelogue marked by trauma**

Whereas the opening chapters on Norway and Sweden draw on Undset's cultural authority and her own personal experience of the invasion, the text changes tact in her effort to give a picture of Russia and Japan in chapters three and four. Employing the genre of travelogue, these chapters are characterized by Undset's effort to render her impressions of foreign countries from the position of an outsider. Undset claims that she first was curious when entering the Soviet Union, since so many of her young fellow countrymen and colleagues had hailed Communist Russia in the 1920's. In *Return to the Future*, Undset stages the meeting with communism by giving the role of the naïve and admiring Norwegian to her twenty-year old son Hans, who soon discovers that Russia is not an utopia and that it is far from the dreams of Western writers and intellectuals. According to Undset, Hans soon realizes that the Russian revolutionary experiment has misfired. In the end, he is totally disillusioned.

Undset's narrative about her journey through Russia is strongly influenced by the historical fact, that the Soviet Union, during the weeks she traversed it in the summer of 1940, was still in alliance with the Axis powers (the Nazi-Soviet Pact had been signed 23 August 1939); Undset was travelling through enemy territory. Furthermore, Stalin's Russia was already seen as an archenemy to Scandinavians because of the Soviet offensive into Finland in late November 1939, which initiated the Winter War and consequently, the Continuation War. The violation of Finnish territory by the USSR was a traumatic experience for most Scandinavians.<sup>11</sup> Undset was among those Scandinavian citizens who offered to host Finnish

child war refugees (the so-called *Krigsbarn*) in order to protect the younger generation from the Russian military offensives in Finland. Of course, Undset could not forget this reality when travelling through Stalin's Russia. Undset's resentment toward Stalinism is evident in her descriptions of Moscow. For instance, she describes how people are housed in very tight spaces, often sharing beds with others while working shift in the many factories. Moscow is dusty and stinks, the buildings are crumbling, and no one takes away the garbage. The toilets in the yards are without proper plumbing and sanitation. Undset sees no shops offering goods and the people are mostly occupied by walking. Page after page Undset focuses on the poor living standard in the Soviet Union, creating a questionable picture of a communist country, with which the Americans – by the time of the publication of *Return to the Future* in 1942 – had joined into alliance (in December 1941, i.e. after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, when the US joined the Allies, which included the USSR). Undset consciously renders her impressions of a nation which does not know, and even does not care, about the dangers of not cleaning themselves and their surroundings. Reading Undset's memoir in 1942, Americans must have felt the need to distance themselves immediately from Soviet Russia and the Russian peoples.

Further, Undset's description again bears open characteristics of an essentialist argumentation about a people founded on culture and political system. Supporting a totalitarian regime, Undset's argument goes, the Russians are giving up their individuality and their freedom, and, as a consequence, they are no longer able to think by themselves and take care of themselves. Communism stresses the collective to such a degree that it kills every individual impulse. Undset recounts that she imagines that people may be "infected" by the bacillus of this communist suppression, when walking with others in the streets in Moscow. In other words, she depicts communism as a disease:

Still Hans and I had ample time to wander about in Moscow. And I imagined, I could feel, there is something hypnotic in collective life, one loses oneself in a way when

one moves with a stream of totally strange people with whom one cannot talk, whose faces tell one absolutely nothing.(Undset 1942: 96)<sup>12</sup>

Undset points to the danger of being hypnotized by collectivism and stresses the possibility of becoming immune to it. In this, she obviously plays on American fears of communism as spreading and infecting the European democracies.

Thus, in *Return to the Future*, Soviet Russia is generally presented as a backwards state which lacks economic and social development and falls hopelessly behind the Western democratic nations. While some outsiders might expect progress after the Bolshevik revolution and greater civil rights, Undset sees people in Russians as behind the times, holding onto ideas that Western democracies left behind in the Nineteenth Century. In other words, for Undset, Soviet Russia was no better prepared for the future than Germany. Obviously, Undset intends to warn her American readers against seeing Russia as a political ally, even though the USSR has joined the Allied forces and opposes Nazi Germany as the enemy.

Considering her American audience, Undset concentrates on emphasizing the differences between Norwegians and Russians. However, her effort to draw out the differences between citizens of democratic countries and citizens living under totalitarian regimes occasionally seems comical. For instance, Undset's scorn for communist propaganda and its effects becomes obvious when she describes the cows in the Russian countryside, which she observes from her train window: "[...] the Russian cows seemed to be collectively inclined – they always walked or stood packed together in a tight cluster [...] I never saw a Russian cow behave like our individualistic ones [...]" (Undset 1942: 118).<sup>13</sup> Undset's observations become absurd, revealing her deep-seated hatred for Stalin's Soviet Union.

The wartime impressions of Imperial Japan are less emotionally targeted. When Undset and her son Hans arrive in Japan, she soon becomes aware of the fact that the Japanese still support patriarchy. Undset is totally ignored by Japanese tour guides who only talk to her young son Hans, even when she is the one who asks the competent questions. Undset therefore gives up on the effort to talk to the guides and keeps quiet, always holding herself behind her son, as she comments in ironic despair: “So I did as the Japanese women do: followed the male head of my family at a respectful distance and in silence.” (Undset 1942: 179)<sup>14</sup> At the same time, she is surprised that in Japan, the living standard is much higher than in Russia, in spite of the ongoing war in China.

Most important, though, the chapter on Japan gives Undset the opportunity to reflect on the influence of Christianity on the development of Western democracies. Part of what she finds lacking in the Japanese people’s political consciousness, is the absence of a belief in Jesus Christ and Christian solidarity of all humans. On the other hand, Christianity only supports democracy in those countries, where the will to freedom has been traditionally strong, such as in the region of the North Atlantic, Undset claims: “It was the peoples along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean who, first and foremost, had this longing for freedom, this determination to make the community more spacious and build it on an increasingly reciprocal basis.” (Undset 1942: 193-194)<sup>15</sup> But the democracies have also been unbelievably naïve in thinking that all other countries would be glad if their inhabitants also would be free. The wish for freedom is not found everywhere, claims Undset in *Return to the Future*. Countries formerly colonized by the British and French, for instance, have reacted against being invaded and occupied, even in cases when the inhabitants ultimately experienced more freedom than they had before the Western colonization.

Without the harsh prejudice which characterizes the observations on Soviet Russia, Undset criticizes Japan for its imperial regime. She has heard about the Japanese fear of the

police, and of the many victims of the war in China. The citizens of wartime Japan are suffering and very poor, even if their houses look better than the houses in Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, it seems as if Japan has a potential for Undset; she claims that under the influence of Western ideology, this cultivated nation would be able to produce democratic thinking by itself. Undset is not able to understand Russia due to her emotional relationship to the Soviet invasion of Finland, but she manages to appreciate imperialistic Japan, observing that the Japanese people share with the Norwegians a love for wood and flowers.

### **Hope and despair: Undset's essayistic reflections on the future for democratic Europe**

In the final chapter, entitled "Return to the future," Undset leaves behind both the genre of the memoir and the travelogue and adapts the style of a polemical essay, which pleads for a future for the Western democracies. She begins with a warning, quoting a Norwegian proverb: "Do not sell the hide before the bear has been shot." (Undset 1942: 207)<sup>16</sup> She warns of the danger in planning a new democratic future for Germany. According to Undset's polemic, German history has shown that the Germans are unable to live peacefully together with other nations. Of course, she knows that the "work of rebuilding a society of free nations and free human beings" (Undset 1942: 210)<sup>17</sup> will be difficult because Hitler's Germany has produced so much hatred in other countries. Hatred is a sterile emotion, which will threaten the project of rebuilding Europe from the ashes of war, observes Undset. What is needed is a better understanding of the German "soul," she claims, suggesting that a soul might be understood and may be treated, psychoanalytically: "We conceive of the souls of nations as individuals, personalities." (Undset 1942: 218)<sup>18</sup> But her description of the German soul then becomes itself heavenly influenced by her own hatred toward the Germans: Using the vile Nazi rhetoric about the Jewish people against the Germans themselves, Undset describes the

German people as essentially psychically crippled, as psychopaths.<sup>19</sup> In the same way as the Nazis ‘diagnosed’ Jews as sharing certain psychic traits, Undset diagnoses Germans as generally loving servitude. Undset ventures that the German soul suffers from a sadomasochist longing for a dictator to deify and serve:

No single note in the ingenious play upon the deepest strings of the German people’s souls which Adolf Hitler has carried on is more ingenious than precisely this: that he has demanded to be worshipped as a godlike being. Thereby he met a German need since time immemorial, a need which was already the chief motif in the German medieval poems about the Niebelungs’ tragic fate, the yearning for an unconditional subjection under a master. (Undset 1942: 222)<sup>20</sup>

Because the German psyche is dominated by the wish to be suppressed, Hitler could win the masses for his cause. At his point in the polemic, Undset’s argumentation transitions from an essentialist perspective, based on culture and landscape, to biological and psychological essentialism. When it comes to Germany, she no longer attempts to explain the people’s soul as based on the political system and their culture in combination with the natural surroundings, but ‘diagnoses’ the fundamental character traits which make the Germans embrace certain political regimes. German militarism is interpreted by Undset as a kind of natural response to the German demand for keeping psychic chaos under control. Quoting her article on women and war written already in 1918 (“Kvinnene og krigen”, Undset 2004a: 292), Undset claims that militarism becomes the uniform worn by a sick people: “I wonder if the German people do not need militarism as the lobster needs its shell – the hard exterior is an armor enclosing a soft, boneless body.” (Undset 1942: 219)<sup>21</sup>

Motivated by her personal hatred towards the Nazi Germans, Undset presents a despicable enemy representation to her American readers. Germany is a “sick” nation of the

mentally ill, which Undset doubts will ever be cured. Adapting the propaganda devices of her enemies, Undset seeks to persuade her American readers to feel disgust and hatred, by creating the appalling image of the German “lobster” crawling over everything in its way. Thus, although Undset explicitly recognizes hatred as the unfortunate outcome of the war, she herself evokes affects in her readers to engage in the emotional battlefield.

In this final chapter, Undset also argues for universal ideas. Democracy is considered an absolute, which must be supported under all conditions, and a principle not to be compromised. Democracy needs to be fought for in any circumstance. This includes equal rights for all citizens, respect for the people and its government, and discussion as the only way to find solutions for all kind of problems. (Undset 1942: 241) Undset surprisingly compares democratic thinking to a scientific method, in which one must patiently discover the best results. On the other hand, she observes that totalitarian regimes rely on phantasies and dreams, which are supported by quasi-scientific methods, such as Nazi Germany’s false promise of an utopian society, which was supported by a racist ideology. For Undset, democracy is the future, and a return to the future goes through America: “Now it is only across America that the road leads back to the future – that which we from the European democracies call future.” (Undset 1942, 203)<sup>22</sup> However, for Undset, America is not the future, but the route to it, back to Norway. And it is the Norwegians who are well prepared to rebuild Europe, if the reader trusts Undset: They are used to hard work, they never give up, as they have over centuries built and rebuilt homes in places ruined by forces of nature such as storms, rains and other challenges of climate.

In summary, *Return to the Future* opens as a memoir about Undset’s escape from Norway. However, underlying the surface of this wartime memoir and travelogue, is a work of clever and subversive propaganda, published at a key moment of the war and aimed deliberately at American readers. Parodying and inverting the vicious propaganda of the

German Nationalist Socialists, as well as that of the Soviet communists of her time, Undset counters the ideologies of her enemies, grounded in biological and racial essentialism, with her own polemic based on a conception of culture. However, her effort to depict the Norwegians as morally superior to the “mentally ill” Germans as well as to the hypnotized Russian communists produces national caricatures, which in the eyes of modern readers might prove to be contra-productive to the Allied aims at rebuilding Europe. Absorbed by grief, and desperation, the author evokes feelings of hatred in order to reach her aim – American help for the British forces fighting against Germany. Ultimately, *Return to the future* serves as problematic propaganda for the Allied project of working for democracy in Europe, because the writer’s own emotional investment in her cause tends to obfuscate the narrative.

#### References List

- Fontander, Björn. 1992. *Undset, Hamsun och kriget*. Stockholm: Carlssos.
- Hamm, Christine. 2013. *Foreldre i det moderne. Sigrid Undsets forfatterskap og moderskapets grammatikk*. Oslo: Akademika.
- Maman, Marie. 2000. *Sigrid Undset in America. An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide*. Lanham, Md., and London: The Carecrow Press.
- Moi, Toril. 1999. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skouen, Arne. 1982. *Sigrid Undset skriver hjem. En vandring gjennom emigrantårene i Amerika*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Slapgard, Sigrun. 2007. *Sigrid Undset, dikterdronning*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Slapgard, Sigrun. 2010. ”Based in Brooklyn”. In *Scandinavian Review*, 97 (1): 22-30.
- Undset, Sigrid. 1942. *Return to the future*. Transl. by Henriette C. K. Naeseth. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Undset, Sigrid. 1945. *Tilbake til fremtiden*. Oslo: Aschehoug.



Undset, Sigrid. 2004. «Hedre din far og din mor.» In *Essays og artikler 1910-1919*, ed. Liv Bliskrud, 122-145. Oslo: Aschehoug.

Undset, Sigrid. 2004b. «De falske ideologier,» In *Essays og artikler 1930-1939*, ed. Liv Bliskrud, 946-949. Oslo: Aschehoug.

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance her comment on Ragnar Vold's critique of German ideology, published in *Morgenbladet* December 15, 1939 (Undset 2004b).

<sup>2</sup> We know little about the contemporary reception of the book in America. On the basis of the letters Undset wrote to her sister Ragnhild in Stockholm, however, Björn Fontander claims that both *Return to the Future* and Undset's other memoir of the same year, *Happy Times in Norway*, which focuses on her children's life before the occupation, were loved by American readers (Fontander 1992: 166).

<sup>3</sup> Det blir å bygge op sundhet igjen i nasjoner, hvor millioner mennesker er blitt ødelagt av underernæring og naken sult, av hat og av abnorme levevilkår, av umenneskelige og nerveslitene opplevelser, – hvor en generasjon av barn har hatt de verst tenkelige forhold å leve op under i grunnleggende alder. (Undset 1945: 173)

<sup>4</sup> «[...] fortelle med saklighet om de faktiske forhold, fortelle om sin egen flukt og erfaring.»

<sup>5</sup> Marie Maman gives an overview of Undset's activities in the United States (Maman 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Ivar Aasen's poem «Nordmannen» is very famous since it is one of the most popular National songs in Norway "Millom bakker og berg". The poem was in a last version printed in the third edition of Aasen's collection of poems *Symra* (1875).

---

<sup>7</sup> Forms of cultural or social constructivism such as they are characterizing Undset's thinking at this point must be criticized for being deterministic and leading to a problematic form of national essentialism. The idea that a nation's climate, history and culture necessarily lead to the development of specific essential character traits of the people parallels the idea that biological or racial characteristics determine a people's essential behavior. For a discussion of problematic forms of determinism, see for instance Toril Moi's title essay in *What Is a Woman?* (Moi 1999) Commenting on different approaches to gender, Moi shows that feminists should deny that biological facts (such as sexual difference and racial diversity) determine social norms. Applied to a discussion of national difference, one would need to deny that cultural specificity necessarily grounds national essence.

<sup>8</sup> Vi norske var blitt et fredelig folk. [...] Og vi er bare tre millioner mennesker – omtrent så mange som det bor i Brooklyn (Undset 1945: 9).

<sup>9</sup> [V]i holdt langt ut til havs, og tidlig på dagen la vi inn i havnen ved et av de ytterste fyrtårn i leden. (Undset 1945: 39-40)

<sup>10</sup> Men mellom karene selv var det utrolig mange hjulbente, sidrumpede og bredrumpede, smalskudrede, plattfotede individer. For nordmennene var det selvfølgelig særlig påfallende at så mange bar briller, – i Norge er det relativt ualmindelig å se folk under 45 med glassøine. (Undset 1945: 68)

<sup>11</sup> Many former Norwegians communists stopped agitating for their cause when Soviet Russia showed its real face and invaded Finland. See for instance Vidar Sandbeck's description of his communist father in *Far* (1984), who is devastated by learning of the Finnish war.

---

<sup>12</sup> Likevel fikk da Hans og jeg rikelig med tid til å vandre rundt i Moskva. Og jeg innbilte mig, jeg kunde føle, det er noe hypnotiserende i kollektivt liv – en taper sig selv på en måte, når en driver slik med strømmen av vilt fremmede mennesker som en ikke kan snakke med, hvis ansikter absolutt ingenting sier en. (Undset 1945, 81-82)

<sup>13</sup> [...] kuene i Russland [lot] til å være kollektivt innstillet, – alltid gikk eller stod de, pakket sammen i tett klynge [...] Aldri så jeg en russisk ku opføre sig som våre individualistiske. (Undset 1945: 101)

<sup>14</sup> Så gjorde jeg som de japanske kvinnene og fulgte efter mannfolket mitt i ærbødig avstand og taushet. (Undset 1945: 150)

<sup>15</sup> Det var folkene langs Atlanterhavskysten først og fremst som hadde denne frihedslengselen, denne viljen til å gjøre samfundet rummeligere og bygge mere og mere gjensidighet. (Undset 1945: 163-164)

<sup>16</sup> “Selg ikke huden, før bjørnen er skudd.” (Undset 1945: 172).

<sup>17</sup> Arbeidet for å bygge op igjen et samfund av frie nasjoner og frie mennesker (Undset 1945: 175)

<sup>18</sup> Vi oppfatter nasjonenes sjeler som personligheter (Undset 1945: 182)

<sup>19</sup> Of course, Undset can point to some very few German intellectuals, whom she suspects by that time to be spread all around the world, living isolated from each other (if they have not been killed in a concentration camp). These are excluded from the general characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> Intet enkelt grep i det geniale spill på den tyske folkepsykes dypeste strenger, som Adolf Hitler har drevet, er mere genialt enn nettopp dette, – at han har krevet å bli dyrket som et

---

guddommelig vesen. Dermed imøtekom han et urgammelt tysk krav, – et krav som er ledemotivet allerede i de tyske middelalderdiktninger om Niebelungenes nød, driften til betingelsesløs underkastelse under én herre. (Undset 1944: 184-185)

<sup>21</sup> Mon ikke det tyske folk trenger militarismen som hummeren trenger sitt skall, – det utvendige hårde panser om sitt myke, benløse legeme. (Undset 1945: 182)

<sup>22</sup> Etter å ha flyktet fra naziinvasjonen i Norge, gjennom Sovjet-Russland og Japan, visste jeg, å komme til Amerika blir allikevel å komme inn på hjemveien igjen. Nu er det bare over Amerika at veien fører tilbake til fremtiden. Det som vi fra de européiske demokratiene kaller fremtid. (Undset 1945: 171)