

State Terrorism and Irrational Terror, Albert Camus

All modern revolutions have ended in a reinforcement of the power of the State. 1789 brings Napoleon; 1848, Napoleon III; 1917, Stalin; the Italian disturbances of the twenties, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler. These revolutions, particularly after the First World War had liquidated the vestiges of divine right, still proposed, with increasing audacity, to build the city of humanity and of authentic freedom. The growing omnipotence of the State sanctioned this ambition on each occasion. It would be erroneous to say that this was bound to happen. But it is possible to examine how it did happen; and perhaps the lesson will follow.

Apart from a few explanations that are not the subject of this essay, the strange and terrifying growth of the modern State can be considered as the logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions, foreign to the true spirit of rebellion, but which nevertheless gave birth to the revolutionary spirit of our time. The prophetic dream of Marx and the over-inspired predictions of Hegel or of Nietzsche ended by conjuring up, after the city of God had been razed to the ground, a rational or irrational State, which in both cases, however, was founded on terror.

In actual fact, the Fascist revolutions of the twentieth century do not merit the title of revolution. They lacked the ambition of universality. Mussolini and Hitler, of course, tried to build an empire, and the National Socialist ideologists were bent, explicitly, on world domination. But the difference between them and the classic revolutionary movement is that, of the nihilist inheritance, they chose to deify the irrational, and the irrational alone, instead of deifying reason. In this way they renounced their claim to universality.

And yet Mussolini makes use of Hegel, and Hitler of Nietzsche; and both illustrate, historically, some of the prophecies of German ideology. In this respect they belong to the history of rebellion and of nihilism. They were the first to construct a State on the concept that everything is meaningless and that history is only written in terms of the hazards of force. The consequences were not long in appearing.

As early as 1914 Mussolini proclaimed the "holy religion of anarchy," and declared himself the enemy of every form of Christianity. As for Hitler, his professed religion unhesitatingly juxtaposed the God-Providence and Valhalla. Actually his god was a political argument and a manner of reaching an impressive climax at the end of his speeches. As long as he was successful, he chose to believe that he was inspired. In the hour of defeat, he considered himself betrayed by his people.

Between the two nothing intervened to announce to the world that he would ever have been capable of thinking himself guilty in relation to any principle. The only man of superior culture who gave Nazism an appearance of being a philosophy, Ernst Junger, even went so far as to choose the actual formulas of nihilism: "The best answer to the betrayal of life by the spirit is the betrayal of the spirit by the spirit, and one of the great and cruel pleasures of our times is to participate in the work of destruction."

Men of action, when they are without faith, have never believed in anything but action. Hitler's untenable paradox lay precisely in wanting to found a stable order on perpetual change and no negation. Rauschnig, in his Revolution of Nihilism, was right in saying that the Hitlerian revolution represented unadulterated dynamism. In Germany, shaken to its foundations by a calamitous war, by defeat, and by economic distress, values no longer existed. Although one must take into account what Goethe called "the German destiny of making everything difficult," the epidemic of suicides that swept through the entire country between the two wars indicates a great deal about the state of mental confusion.

To those who despair of everything, not reason but only passion can provide a faith, and in this particular case it must be the same passion that lay at the root of the despair—namely, humiliation and hatred. There was no longer any standard of values, both common to and superior to all these men, in the name of which it would have been possible for them to judge one another. The Germany of 1933 thus agreed to adopt the degraded values of a mere handful of men and tried to impose them on an entire civilization. Deprived of the morality of Goethe, Germany chose, and submitted to, the ethics of the gang.

Gangster morality is an inexhaustible round of triumph and revenge, defeat and resentment. When Mussolini extolled "the elemental forces of the individual," he announced the exaltation of the dark powers of blood and instinct, the biological justification of all the worst things produced by the instinct of domination. At the Nuremberg trials, Frank emphasized "the hatred of form" which animated Hitler. It is true that this man was nothing but an elemental force in motion, directed and rendered more effective by calculated cunning and by a relentless tactical clairvoyance. Even his physical appearance, which was thoroughly mediocre and commonplace, was no limitation: it established him firmly with the masses.

Action alone kept him alive. For him, to exist was to act. That is why Hitler and his regime could not dispense with enemies. They could only define themselves, psychopathic dandies¹ that they were, in relation to their enemies, and only assume their final form in the bloody battle that was to be their downfall. The Jews, the Freemasons, the plutocrats, the Anglo-Saxons, the bestial Slavs succeeded one another in their propaganda and their history as a means of propping up, each time a little higher, the blind force that was stumbling headlong toward its end. Perpetual strife demanded perpetual stimulants.

¹ It is well known that Goring sometimes entertained dressed as Nero and with his face made up.

Hitler was history in its purest form. "Evolution," said Junger, "is far more important than living." Thus he preached complete identification with the stream of life, on the lowest level and in defiance of all superior reality. A regime which invented a biological foreign policy was obviously acting against its own best interests. But at least it obeyed its own particular logic. Rosenberg speaks pompously of life in the following terms: "Like a column on the march, and it is of little importance toward what destination and for what ends this column is marching." Though later the column will strew ruins over the pages of history and will devastate its own country, it will at least have had the gratification of living.

The real logic of this dynamism was either total defeat or a progress from conquest to conquest and from enemy to enemy, until the eventual establishment of the empire of blood and action. It is very unlikely that Hitler ever had any conception, at least at the beginning, of this empire. Neither by culture nor even by instinct or tactical intelligence was he equal to his destiny.

Germany collapsed as a result of having engaged in a struggle for empire with the concepts of provincial politics. But Junger had grasped the import of this logic and had formulated it in definite terms. He had a vision of "a technological world empire," of a "religion of anti-Christian technology," of which the faithful and the militants would have themselves been the priests because (and here Junger rejoins Marx), on account of his human form, the worker is universal. "The statutes of a new authoritarian regime take the place of a change in the social contract. The worker is removed from the sphere of negotiation, from pity, and from literature and elevated to the sphere of action. Legal obligations are transformed into military obligations."

It can be seen that the empire is simultaneously the factory and the barracks of the world, where Hegel's soldier worker reigns as a slave. Hitler was halted relatively soon on the way to the realization of this empire. But even if he had

gone still farther, we should only have witnessed the more and more extensive deployment of an irresistible dynamism and the increasingly violent enforcement of cynical principles which alone would be capable of serving this dynamism. Speaking of such a revolution, Rauschning says that it has nothing to do with liberation, justice, and inspiration: it is "the death of freedom, the triumph of violence, and the enslavement of the mind." Fascism is an act of contempt, in fact. Inversely, every form of contempt, if it intervenes in politics, prepares the way for, or establishes, Fascism. It must be added that Fascism cannot be any-

thing else but an expression of contempt without denying itself. Junger drew the conclusion, from his own principles, that it was better to be criminal than bourgeois. Hitler, who was endowed with less literary talent but, on this occasion, with more coherence, knew that to be either one or the other was a matter of complete indifference, from the moment that one ceased to believe in anything but success. Thus he authorized himself to be both at the same time. "Fact is all," said Mussolini.

And Hitler added: "When the race is in danger of being oppressed . . . the question of legality plays only a secondary role." Moreover, in that the race must always be menaced in order to exist, there is never any legality. "I am ready to sign anything, to agree to anything. . . . As far as I am concerned, I am capable, in complete good faith, of signing treaties today and of dispassionately tearing them up tomorrow if the future of the German people is at stake."

Before he declared war, moreover, Hitler made the statement to his generals that no one was going to ask the victor if he had told the truth or not. The leitmotiv of Goring's defense at the Nuremberg trials returned time and again to this theme: "The victor will always be the judge, and the vanquished will always be the accused." That is a point that can certainly be argued. But then it is hard to understand Rosenberg when he said during the Nuremberg trials that he had not foreseen that the Nazi myth would lead to murder.

When the English prosecuting attorney observes that "from Mein Kampf the road led straight to the gas chambers at Maidenek," he touches on the real subject of the trial, that of the historic responsibilities of Western nihilism and the only one which, nevertheless, was not really discussed at Nuremberg, for reasons only too evident. A trial cannot be conducted by announcing the general culpability of a civilization. Only the actual deeds which, at least, stank in the nostrils of the entire world were brought to judgment.

Hitler, in any case, invented the perpetual motion of conquest, without which he would have been nothing at all. But the perpetual enemy is perpetual terror, this time on the level of the State. The State is identified with the "apparatus"; that is to say, with the sum total of mechanisms of conquest and repression. Conquest directed toward the interior of the country is called repression or propaganda ("the first step on the road to hell," according to Frank). Directed toward the exterior, it creates the army. All problems are thus militarized and posed in terms of power and efficiency. The supreme commander determines policy and also deals with all the main problems of administration. This principle, axiomatic as far as strategy is concerned, is applied to civil life in general.

One leader, one people, signifies one master and millions of slaves. The political intermediaries who are, in all societies, the guarantors of freedom, disappear to make way for a booted and spurred Jehovah who rules over the silent masses or, which comes to the same thing, over masses who shout slogans at the top of their lungs. There is no organ of conciliation or mediation interposed between the leader and the people, nothing in fact but the apparatusâ" in other words, the partyâ" which is the emanation of the leader and the tool of his will to oppress. In this way the first and sole principle of this degraded form of mysticism is born, the Fuhr-erprinzip, which restores idolatry and a debased deity to the world of nihilism.

Mussolini, the Latin lawyer, contented himself with reasons of State, which he transformed, with a great deal of rhetoric, into the absolute. "Nothing beyond the State, above the State, against the State. Everything to the State, for the State, in the State." The Germany of Hitler gave his false reasoning its real expression, which was that of a religion. "Our divine mission," says a Nazi newspaper during a party congress, "was to lead everyone back to his origins, back to the common Mother. It was truly a divine mission." These origins are thus to be found in primitive howls and shrieks. Who is the god in question?

An official party declaration answers that: "All of us here below believe in Adolf Hitler, our Fiihrer . . . and [we confess] that National Socialism is the only faith which can lead our people to salvation." The commandments of the leader, standing in the burning bush of spotlights, on a Sinai of planks and flags, therefore comprise both law and virtue.

If the superhuman microphones give orders only once for a crime to be committed, then the crime is handed down from chief to subchief until it reaches the slave who receives orders without being able to pass them on to anybody. One of the Dachau executioners weeps in prison and says: "I only obeyed orders. The Fuhrer and the Reichsfuhrer alone planned all this, and then they ran away. Gluecks received orders from Kaltenbrunner and, finally, I received orders to carry out the shootings.

I have been left holding the bag because I was only a little Hauptscharfuhrer and because I couldn't hand it on any lower down the line. Now they say that I am the assassin." Goring during the trial proclaimed his loyalty to the Fiihrer and said that "there was still a code of honor in that accursed life." Honor lay in obedience, which was often confused with crime. Military law punishes disobedience by death, and its honor is servitude. When all the world has become military, then crime consists in not killing if orders insist on it.

Orders, unfortunately, seldom insist on good deeds. Pure doctrinal dynamism cannot be directed toward good, but only toward efficacy. As long as enemies exist, terror will exist; and there will be enemies as long as dynamism exists to ensure that: "All the influences liable to undermine the sovereignty of the people, as exercised by the Fiihrer with the assistance of the party . . . must be eliminated." Enemies are heretics and must be converted by preaching or propaganda, exterminated by inquisition or by the Gestapo. The result is that man, if he is a member of the party, is no more than a tool in the hands of the Fiihrer, a cog in the apparatus, or, if he is the enemy of the Fiihrer, a waste product of the machine.

The impetus toward irrationality of this movement, born of rebellion, now even goes so far as to propose suppressing all that makes man more than a cog in the machine; in other words, rebellion itself. The romantic individualism of the German revolutions finally satiated in the world of inanimate objects. Irrational terror transforms men into objects, "planetary bacilli," according to Hitler's formula.

It proposes the destruction, not only of the individual, but of the universal possibilities of the individual, of reflection, solidarity, and the urge to absolute love. Propaganda and torture are the direct means of bringing about disintegration; more destructive still are systematic degradation, identification with the cynical criminal, and forced complicity. The triumph of the man who kills or tortures is marred by only one shadow: he is unable to feel that he is innocent.

Thus, he must create guilt in his victim so that, in a world that has no direction, universal guilt will authorize no other course of action than the use of force and give its blessing to nothing but success. When the concept of innocence disappears from the mind of the innocent victim himself, the value of power establishes a definitive rule over a world in despair. That is why an unworthy and cruel penitence reigns over this world where only the stones are

innocent.

The condemned are compelled to hang one another. Even the innocent cry of maternity is stifled, as in the case of the Greek mother who was forced by an officer to choose which of her three sons was to be shot. This is the final realization of freedom: the power to kill and degrade saves the servile soul from utter emptiness. The hymn of German freedom is sung, to the music of a prisoners' orchestra, in the camps of death.

The crimes of the Hitler regime, among them the massacre of the Jews, are without precedent in history because history gives no other example of a doctrine of such total destruction being able to seize the levers of command of a civilized nation. But above all, for the first time in history, the rulers of a country have used their immense power to establish a mystique beyond the bounds of any ethical considerations. This first attempt to found a Church on nihilism was paid for by complete annihilation. The destruction of Lidice demonstrates clearly that the systematic and scientific aspect of the Nazi movement really hides an irrational drive that can only be interpreted as a drive of despair and arrogance.

Until then, there were supposedly only two possible attitudes for a conqueror toward a village that was considered rebellious. Either calculated repression and cold-blooded execution of hostages, or a savage and necessarily brief sack by enraged soldiers. Lidice was destroyed by both methods simultaneously. It illustrates the ravages of that irrational form of reason which is the only value that can be found in the whole story. Not only were all the houses burned to the ground, the hundred and seventy-four men of the village shot, the two hundred and three women deported, and the three

hundred children transferred elsewhere to be educated in the religion of the Fuhrer, but special teams spent months at work leveling the terrain with dynamite, destroying the very stones, filling in the village pond, and finally diverting the course of the river. After that, Lidice was really nothing more than a mere possibility, according to the logic of the movement. To make assurance doubly sure, the cemetery was emptied of its dead, who might have been a perpetual reminder that once something existed in this place.²

² It is striking to note that atrocities reminiscent of these excesses were committed in colonies (India, 1857; Algeria, 1945; etc.) by European nations that in reality obeyed the same irrational prejudice of racial superiority.

The nihilist revolution, which is expressed historically in the Hitlerian religion, thus only aroused an insensate passion for nothingness, which ended by turning against itself. Negation, this time at any rate, and despite Hegel, has not been creative. Hitler presents the example, perhaps unique in history, of a tyrant who left absolutely nothing to his credit. For himself, for his people, and for the world, he was nothing but the epitome of suicide and murder. Seven million Jews assassinated, seven million Europeans deported or killed, ten million war victims, are perhaps not sufficient to allow history to pass judgment: history is accustomed to murderers.

But the very destruction of Hitler's final justification that is, the German nationâ "henceforth makes this man, whose presence in history for years on end haunted the minds of millions of men, into an inconsistent and contemptible phantom. Speer's deposition at the Nuremberg trials showed that Hitler, though he could have stopped the war before the point of total disaster, really wanted universal suicide and the material and political destruction of the German nation.

The only value for him remained, until the bitter end, success. Since Germany had lost the war, she was cowardly and treacherous and she deserved to die. "If the German people are incapable of victory, they are unworthy to live." Hitler therefore decided to drag them with him to the grave and to make their destruction an apotheosis, when the Russian cannon were already splitting apart

the walls of his palace in Berlin.

Hitler, Goring, who wanted to see his bones placed in a marble tomb, Goebbels, Himmler, Ley, killed themselves in dugouts or in cells. But their deaths were deaths for nothing; they were like a bad dream, a puff of smoke that vanishes. Neither efficacious nor exemplary, they consecrate the bloodthirsty vanity of nihilism. "They thought they were free," Frank cries hysterically; "didn't they know that no one escapes from Hitlerism?" They did not know; nor did they know that the negation of everything is in itself a form of servitude and that real freedom is an inner submission to a value which defies history and its successes.

But the Fascist mystics, even though they aimed at gradually dominating the world, really never had pretensions to a universal empire. At the very most, Hitler, astonished at his own victories, was diverted from the provincial origins of his movement towards the indefinite dream of an empire of the Germans that had nothing to do with the universal City. Russian Communism, on the contrary, by its very origins, openly aspires to world empire.

That is its strength, its deliberate significance, and its importance in our history. Despite appearances, the German revolution had no hope of a future. It was only a primitive impulse whose ravages have been greater than its real ambitions. Russian Communism, on the contrary, has appropriated the metaphysical ambition that this book describes, the erection, after the death of God, of a city of man finally deified. The name revolution, to which Hitler's adventure had no claim, was once deserved by Russian Communism, and although it apparently deserves it no longer, it claims that one day it will deserve it forever.

For the first time in history, a doctrine and a movement based on an Empire in arms has as its purpose definitive revolution and the final unification of the world. It remains for us to examine this pretension in detail. Hitler, at the height of his madness, wanted to fix the course of history for a thousand years. He believed himself to be on the point of doing so, and the realist philosophers of the conquered nations were preparing to acknowledge this and to excuse it, when the Battle of Britain and Stalingrad threw him back on the path of death and set history once more on the march. But, as indefatigable as history itself, the claim of the human race to divinity is once more brought to life, with more seriousness, more efficiency, and more reason, under the auspices of the rational State as it is to be found in Russia.

The end