
Preface

The twentieth was perhaps the most destructive century in human history. Certainly, more lives and property were consumed through willful human agency during those years than in any other comparable period of time. Human beings killed each other, and destroyed things, with such serious application that the entire century bore a nightmare quality. Millions upon millions perished. Entire cities disappeared—and whole continents seemed shaken. At the end, millions of broken human beings returned to shattered homes—and only few really could remember what it had been all about. We were told it was all madness—as though that might serve as explanation. In fact, the tragedy deserves more of an accounting than that.

Surely it was a time of madness, but the unnumbered dead of the past century deserve something more than that simple affirmation. The work before the reader attempts to provide something of an interpretive story of that doleful time—its beliefs, its passions, and its temper. Amid all the other factors that contributed to the tragedy, there was a kind of creedal ferocity that made every exchange a matter of existential importance. The twentieth century was host to systems of doctrinal conviction that made unorthodox belief a capital affront, made conflict mortal, and all enterprise sacrificial. Such belief systems were predicated on moral persuasions so intense and inflexible that they could tolerate only an absolute unanimity of opinion within their sphere of influence. Nor was unanimity expected only in opinions held. Entire categories of human beings—conceived somehow “alien”—were condemned to destruction because of some indelible deficiency—membership in some offending economic class, or as product of a blighted biological provenance. Communities so circumstanced became jealous of their homogeneity, their infrangible unity. In such an environment, thought became “ideological,” so that any opposition, no mat-

ter how temporary or trivial, appeared to threaten the extirpation of a faith, an insult to an entire manner of life.

The century saw the emergence of governments that charged themselves with the responsibility of governing lives in such fashion as to leave little to personal choice. Life was seen as willing service, implicit duty, spontaneous sacrifice, and selfless toil—and politics the infallible guide to it all. There were special books, written by special authors—that were to be venerated. There were Leaders, chosen by God or History—or both as one—who were Saviors, and Prophets, and All Seeing Sages. There were unitary political parties that were repositories of impeccable truth, sure science, and intuitive verities. There were guardians of it all—“vanguards,” and “hierarchies,” and “central committees,” all equipped with answers to all the questions that have puzzled human beings since the beginnings of consciousness. And there were “New Men” who would people a redeemed creation.

In war and peace these political systems demanded more of their subjects than any other system of government in human memory. In war, there was a ferocity and an ardor rarely experienced. Millions gave themselves over to combat without reserve. Whole populations continued to fight when everything was lost. We have identified those systems so typified by a variety of names—as “dictatorships,” as “despotisms,” as “totalitarianisms,” and sometimes, when passions somewhat abated, as “administered societies.” Whatever the names given, there was something in such systems that was unique—that sometimes did not register among those who saw in them something “regenerative.” That something was alive with a kind of fervor we have almost always identified with religion, spontaneous or institutional.

That is what this work has chosen to address: that clutch of ideas, identified as “political religion” that animates the systems considered. The presence of a political religion among all the other variables that shape events explains neither the history of those systems nor that of the twentieth century. The argument here is that the discussion of the role of political religion in such systems contributes to our general understanding of the complex period under consideration. The twentieth century was the product of so many contributing factors that no single insight could pretend to account for it all. The contention here is that a collection of beliefs, that share properties with the religions with which we have been familiar, operated in the twentieth century to make the contest of ideas and the challenge of arms more ferocious and destructive than they might otherwise have been.

We shall be concerned here with the history of such ideas. It cannot be an exhaustive history. That would exceed both the capacity of the author and the

patience of the reader. Neither can it be a “true” account of the ideas of any of the authors to whom reference is made. It is not at all clear what the “truth” of any of the ideas of a political theorist might be—so many of their ideas defy any known process of confirmation. At best, what is attempted is to show that revolutionary leaders have referred to the work of political theorists and have drawn from that work certain implications. It is left to others to attempt to explain how and why ideas make human beings behave as they do—or in what circumstances such ideas become effective.

The work before the reader will attempt to deliver an account of the ideas that inspired many in the twentieth century, convincing them to live, to labor, to sacrifice, to obey, and to fight and die in their service. It will attempt to give dimension to the terrible tragedy of the twentieth century. It will be an account of secular faiths, bearing many names. It will speak of Marxism-Leninisms, of Fascism, and of National Socialism. Many have dealt with these ideologies as having the qualities of religion. It is hoped that this work contributes something to that important discussion.

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