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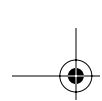
THE BLOODIEST CENTURY OF ALL

*All ye who pass in quest of happy hours, behold
the cost at which those hours were bought.*

The large, bold inscription stands above the doorway inside the lobby of Stoke Newington Public Library in London. When I first saw it, I had merely been walking past the open entrance on the street, my mind pre-occupied with quite other things than “happy hours” in the library. Yet I was so struck by the force of the words that I instantly stopped and peered within the lobby. My eyes instinctively cast about rapidly, attempting to obey the instruction. What was it that I should “behold”? And, as the engraver had doubtless anticipated, it took a mere moment before they alighted on the intended object. The entire wall to the left of the inscription was covered with hundreds of names. Stoke Newington had paid a heavier price, in terms of World War I dead, than most places of its size in Britain; this was their memorial. The civic authorities of the 1920s, with a mentality markedly different from that holding sway today, had intended that no user of its principal civic amenity—the library—should ever forget that “happy hours,” relaxation and the pleasures of reading and scholarship had all been “bought” in blood.

For the secular conflicts of the twentieth century mobilized populations against one another on a scale that the monarchs of the past could never have imagined possible. The peace they supposedly fought to establish (on the victors’ terms) came at an ever higher price. War became





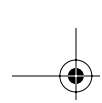
total, cutting off trade and all interactions between individuals in opposing states, so that the populace could dedicate themselves to the one, overriding objective: winning the war. When peace eventually came, entire populations owned it as never before; just as they had been unable to escape ownership of the war, so the peace that followed seemed truly to be theirs. War memorials had not been erected for the common soldiers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; still less for those of the Middle Ages. Just as in Roman times, such civic honor had been the preserve of all-conquering generals, and even then the practice became common only from the eighteenth century. But the increasingly popular nature of modern, total war meant that the deaths of soldiers, sailors and airmen could no longer be seen as private tragedies for the families from which they came; they were *our* war dead. They were the appalling “cost” for the “happy hours” that we, the grateful debtors to the fallen, might enjoy in consequence of their sacrifice.



While it would be foolish to deny that religious concerns have played a prominent part in many conflicts throughout much of history, it nevertheless remains an unavoidable fact that the modern, total wars have been avowedly secular in nature. Indeed, the twentieth century must provide the litmus test for the question of whether secularism can ever do better than religion in conflict avoidance, for it is during that era, so recently ended, that the ideas of the Enlightenment fully seized hold of the levers of government in all of the world’s leading powers and in many minor powers besides. Kings, together with the churches that they had upheld and that had in turn upheld them, were replaced by republics upholding no church at all.

Some of the new states became totalitarian dictatorships, while others clung to democratic forms of government. Many of the former claimed the legitimation of science, not faith, and often persecuted religion either cautiously and semi-secretly, as with the Nazis, or openly and on principle, as did the communists. Even in the democracies, there was a presumption among academics, journalists, politicians and the other leading opinion



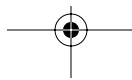
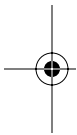


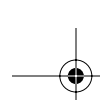
formers in society that there was a fundamental conflict between modern science and religious faith and that the latter was essentially obscurantist. Inevitably it was a view increasingly shared by the ordinary people whose outlooks were shaped by what they read, heard and, later in the century, saw in the media, and what they were taught in school. Some of the most important political forces, especially on the left, were disdainful of the role played by the churches and were at least sympathetic to Marx's dictum that religion was "the opium of the people." Libertarians, who were a small minority early in the century but formed an overwhelming majority of the Western establishment by its end, also opposed religion as restrictive of human freedoms, especially in sexual matters.

The Enlightenment principles tended to indicate that power inhered, or should inhere, not in monarchs but in the people. Politics, the economy and the law should be organized on rational principles, not on the basis of received wisdom, hereditary privilege or medieval presumptions about a society revolving around the ownership of land. How has rationalism worked out in matters relating to warfare?

During the course of the nineteenth century, the most advanced states possessed sufficiently competent bureaucracies to introduce military training for all able-bodied young men, along with the idea of holding them in permanent reserve in case of need during time of war. As John Keegan observes, this development "produced large, relatively cheap peacetime armies, while the reserve obligation promised to produce very large wartime ones."¹ The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky pointed to the consequences for the sheer scale of hostilities during time of war:

Well, just take a good look round you: rivers of blood are being spilt, and in the jolliest imaginable way, like champagne. Take all our nineteenth century. . . . Look at Napoleon, the Great and the present one [Louis Napoleon]. Look at North America—the everlasting union [sundered by the Civil War]. Look, finally, at Schleswig-Holstein. . . . And what, pray, does civilization soften in us?²



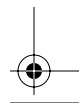
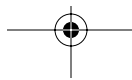
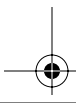
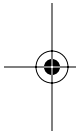


Modernist Western rationalism was proving capable of mechanizing more than just the production of cotton cloth and pottery. It made people more efficient, not more peaceful. Modernity was making possible the era of total war.

The four bloodiest conflicts in human history have all taken place in relatively recent times. The most lethal conflict was World War II, which claimed between fifty and sixty million lives. (Precise figures are impossible, and even approximations remain disputed, though they fall generally within this range.) The second costliest, in terms of loss of life, was the T'ai-Ping rebellion in China, from 1850 to 1864, in which the dead may have numbered somewhere around twenty million.³ World War I inflicted perhaps fifteen million dead: around eight and a half million in battle and perhaps another six and a half million civilians, though, again, estimates vary.⁴ And the fourth was the Russian Civil War, which followed in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Estimates of the number of casualties in that conflict continue to differ enormously, and even definitions are problematic, but around nine million seems to be the safest figure.⁵ The claim, therefore, that the wars of secular modernity were bloodier because they were essentially secular seems almost irresistible. Secularism, it seems, has caused far worse conflicts than has religion.

However, there is a certain fatuousness in pointing out that the bloodiest wars have been the most recent. As technology has leaped forward, everything has been made more efficient, including the appalling business of killing people. The invention of the machine gun, of barbed wire, of tanks and of aerial bombardment all represent the early-twentieth-century application of the industrial revolution to the process of warfare—that is, of organized mass slaughter. The development of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare represents further technologization, and with it, a vast extension of the same enterprise. As Roland H. Bainton observed,

The great change came through technology. New weapons pre-



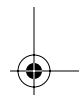
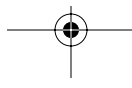


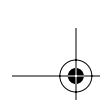
cluded humanitarian restraint. . . . The submarine could and did send out a wireless as to the location of a stricken vessel, but it lacked accommodation for the removal of the crew and passengers. Poisoned gas cannot be palliated. The blockade in the Middle Ages had been applied usually to cities from which noncombatants were sometimes permitted to withdraw. . . . Such permissions could not be granted when the whole of Germany was ringed around and the object was to break the war potential of the populace.⁶

The wars of secular modernity, then, were more catastrophic not because they were secular but because they were modern. Warfare would have become bloodier, it might be argued, even if secularization had never happened because, in technologically advanced societies, the means of killing people are bound to be more effective. And however lamentable that fact may be, its ideological or religious significance is limited; although social beliefs, religious or otherwise, may affect a society's ability to develop technology, the application of that technology, once it exists, to any and all of the exigencies of that society, including warfare, has a certain inevitability and is unaffected by whether the society is religious or secular, conservative or radical, open or totalitarian.

So the kind of religious objection that points to the mere fact of enormous casualties in modern conflicts, generated by secular societies and atheistic ideologies, does not demonstrate as much as it appears. If religious people wish to hang the phenomenon of mass death in modern war around the neck of secularism, then they need to do more. They must be able to point to the belligerence of secularist creeds and the societies that embrace them and perhaps to the determination, or at least to the tendency, of nonreligious combatants to inflict death and destruction on principle.

In fact, however, this is not hard to do. Keegan, perhaps the greatest living historian of war, points out that though the Greeks and Romans thought of war as being an integral part of human existence, this idea was



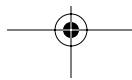
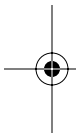


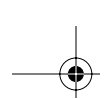
“deprecated both by Christianity and Islam” but was revived powerfully in the nineteenth century, partly under the impact of Charles Darwin’s understanding of life as a process of permanent struggle with competitors for survival.⁷

There is much to be said in favor of this understanding of how views about warfare have changed over the centuries. Heraclitus, in the fifth century B.C., expressed the then common view that “war is common to all and strife is justice . . . all things come into being and pass away through strife.” Indeed, the inhabitants of the Greek city-states took warfare, either between themselves or against the looming presence of the Persian Empire, as part of the natural order of things.

The extent of Christian deprecations of this position we shall have cause to notice presently. But the classical view was revived in a new form from the late nineteenth century onward, claims Keegan, as a result of Darwin’s “theory of the natural selection of the fittest” spilling over into other disciplines, such as philosophy, the social sciences and politics. (It seems that he is right: think of the proliferation of nonbiological uses of the term *evolution* from the late nineteenth century down to the present, to denote something supposedly higher and inevitable.) The Darwinian direction of thought, in which history is impersonal, people are mere products of nature, conflict is the engine of the universe and the key to understanding its complexity is held by some scientific theoretician: this had “its direst outcomes” in the totalitarian creeds of the twentieth century, “particularly the Bolshevism of Lenin and the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler.”⁸

The godless and supposedly scientific creeds have proven to be far bloodier than their religious antecedents, precisely because they have no basis for any doctrine of the preciousness of each person. As Leon Trotsky, one of the Russian revolutionary leaders, put it, “We must put an end once and for all to the papist-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life.”⁹ Trotsky, himself of Jewish background, had chosen his “papist-Quaker” epithet well. “Papist” was shorthand for Western, over against





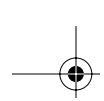
which Russians, who were overwhelmingly Orthodox, had long identified themselves; “Quaker” stood for foreign sectarian. But, despite the careful nationalist positioning of his chosen terminology, Trotsky’s real target was the Judeo-Christian tradition itself. Later in the century, the same point was made by the Latin American Communist guerrilla leader Che Guevara (1928-1967), whose romantic image has been ceaselessly used as adolescent affectation of chic violence. In 1956, he wrote to his mother from a Mexican jail, “I am no Christ, nor a philanthropist. I am the very opposite of Christ. . . . I will fight with all the arms within reach.”¹⁰ The teaching of Jesus was inseparable from the philanthropy (the love of human beings for their own sake) to which he referred, and this was an insuperable obstacle to crushing one’s enemies.

According to Trotsky, “Repression remains a necessary means of breaking the will of the opposing side” as long as class society continued to exist. “Terror can be very efficient against a reactionary class which does not want to leave the scene of operations”—and he recommended employing it; such terror could be condemned only, he contended, by complete pacifists. “You do not understand this, holy men?” he asked, mockingly.

We shall explain to you. The terror of Tsarism was directed against the proletariat. The gendarmerie of Tsarism throttled the workers who were fighting for the Socialist order. Our Extraordinary Commissions shoot landlords, capitalists, and generals who are striving to restore the capitalist order. Do you grasp this distinction? Yes? For us Communists it is quite sufficient.¹¹

Of course, there was a certain disingenuousness in the parallel he was making: even at an early stage, the Bolshevik regime was killing many times more of its enemies than the tsarist governments had ever done. And later, when the Bolsheviks were firmly in power, more prisoners were shot at just one Soviet camp, Serpentinnyaya, in a single year (1938) than had been executed by the tsarist regime during the entire nineteenth century.¹² But Trotsky’s central argument was that violence was right or



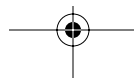


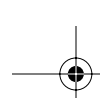
wrong solely according to who was perpetrating it against whom.

“Who? Whom?” Lenin had coined the famous phrase before the revolution had even begun. And he agreed wholeheartedly with Trotsky’s principled ruthlessness about individual human lives. “What is better?” Lenin asked in July 1919,

to ferret out, to imprison, sometimes even to shoot hundreds of traitors from among the Kadets, nonparty people, Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, who “come out” . . . against the Soviet power, in other words, in favor of Denikin? Or to allow matters to reach a pass enabling Kolchak and Denikin to slaughter, shoot and flog to death tens of thousands of workers and peasants? The choice is not difficult to make.¹³

Indeed, the Russian Civil War saw massive violence unleashed against all manner of opponents of the revolution and, as historians unite in pointing out, against countless thousands who were merely accused as a result of personal grudges or who belonged to the “wrong” social class. Each town and village, Lenin urged, should devise its own method of “cleansing the land of all vermin, of scoundrel fleas, the bedbug rich.” According to him, the socialist state was intended to be “a system of organized violence” against the bourgeoisie.¹⁴ In August 1918, when writing to the Bolsheviks in the district of Penza, who were putting down a peasant uprising against the Communists, he ordered that it be “mercilessly suppressed. . . . Hang (hang without fail, so the people see) *no fewer than one hundred* kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers. Publish their names. Take from them *all* the grain. Designate hostages.” He finished his communication with an instruction to “Telegraph receipt [of this] and *implementation*,” and added, “P.S. Find some *truly hard* people.”¹⁵ Concerning the clergy who opposed the revolution, he urged that “we should now wage the most decisive and merciless war” against them and “suppress its resistance with such cruelty that they will not forget it for decades to come. . . . The more members of the reactionary bourgeoisie and clergy we man-



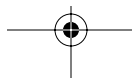


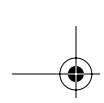
age to shoot the better.”¹⁶ Two years later, in August 1920, when the Red Army was engaged in an ultimately failed attempt to invade Poland, he sent an urgent telegram to the Polish Communist Karol Radek: “I beg you, go straight to Dzierzynski and insist that the landowners and kulaks are destroyed ruthlessly and a bit more quickly and energetically.”¹⁷

It should be stressed that Lenin’s view was neither an aberration nor a distortion of the revolutionary ideals: it was intrinsic to the atheistic creed. And the reason for that, as we saw with Trotsky, was the principled repudiation of the sanctity of human life. This may seem obvious to many readers, yet there remain those who persist in positing a “nice Lenin” in juxtaposition to a “nasty Stalin,” with the latter having somehow corrupted a good and noble project or one that was, at worst, nobly misguided.¹⁸ But this is wrong. Lenin’s ruthlessness was longstanding and antedated by far the Russian Revolution. In 1891 and 1892, when the Volga region, where Lenin had been living at that time, had been gripped by famine, he was scornful of the relief efforts of liberals and even some radicals on the grounds that famine would serve to radicalize the masses: “Psychologically, this talk of feeding the starving is nothing but an expression of the saccharine-sweet sentimentality so characteristic of our intelligentsia.”¹⁹ The more people starved to death, the likelier the survivors would be to blame the government and support red revolution: that was what mattered. That is exactly the point of the Bolsheviks’ maxim of the prerevolutionary period: “The worse, the better.”

Human lives as such were unimportant: what counted was the grand scheme of things—the attainment of the set of abstract ideals that constituted communism. It was Lenin who insisted that

only after we have overthrown, finally vanquished and expropriated the bourgeoisie of the whole world, and not merely of one country, will wars become impossible. And from a scientific point of view it would be utterly wrong—and utterly unrevolutionary—for us to evade or gloss over the most important thing: crushing the resis-





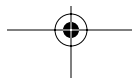
tance of the bourgeoisie—the most difficult task, and one demanding the greatest amount of fighting, in the *transition* to socialism.²⁰

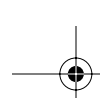
Until that glorious future was attained, war was needed and desirable. Efraim Karsh has observed that Lenin saw “nothing immoral in war as such: what determines its moral value is the cause for which it is being fought.”²¹ As the anarchist A. G. Zhelezniakov had argued, “For the welfare of the Russian people even a million people could be killed.”²²

The actuality of the revolution cost far, far more lives than a million. But the principle was clear all along: actions were good or bad not in and of themselves but according to whether they served for or against the cause of worldwide socialism. Until that goal was reached, the globe would unavoidably be divided into armed camps. Real peace was a synonym for the triumph of socialism; any peace before that was a mere tactic, a stratagem for regrouping forces before a fresh bout of fighting against the capitalists.

The parallel with the Muslims’ division of the world into the *dar al harb* (“realm of war”) and the *dar al Islam* (“realm of Islam”) is both accidental, in the sense that Lenin and the Bolsheviks would have had no reason to copy it, and far from accidental, in the sense that Islam and communism share the same teleology, or dynamic, toward universal, this-worldly rule.²³ It is this feature, and its frequent though far from unanimous adoption by Christian churches, that will form a recurring theme in this book.

Karl Marx, the intellectual mentor of all the communists, never had the power to practice violence. Even so, one modern writer, noting his violent speeches, his interminable rows, his propensity to inform the police about the activities of fellow revolutionaries with whom he had quarreled, his habit of dismissing opponents with the words “I will annihilate you,” his outbursts of fury on all manner of occasions and his repeated advocacy of terrorism, concludes, “That Marx, once established in power, would have been capable of great violence and cruelty seems certain.”²⁴ His chief collaborator, Friedrich Engels, was similarly minded. In an 1849 article in the





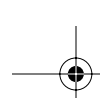
Neue Rheinische Zeitung, published by Marx, he wrote that only the Germans, Hungarians and Poles could be accounted bearers of progress in Central Europe: “The chief mission of all other races and peoples, large and small”—peoples he described as *Völkerabfall*, ethnic trash—“is to perish in the revolutionary holocaust.” It was prescience indeed.²⁵

For secular revolutions, violence and warfare are always justifiable if they serve the cause. This had been seen as far back as the French Revolution, when Robespierre had opined that for the revolutionary government, “terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible . . . an emanation of virtue.” He was writing in 1794, the year after the notorious Terror directed against enemies of the revolution, which he sought to justify. Because the business of killing priests and royalists helped to secure the new regime in power, it was “a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.”²⁶ To be sure, governments were supposed to protect their citizens, but this hardly applied to those whom the revolutionaries were killing, since “all citizens in the republic are republicans.” It followed that those who were not republicans, such as royalists, “are strangers, or rather enemies.”²⁷

This principle—that only those who agree with or fit into the favored categories of the government count as citizens or even as human beings—was to be used again and again during the nationalist and socialist regimes of the modern era. Mao illustrated the same tendency when he said that “the right of reactionaries to voice their opinions must be abolished and only the people are allowed to have the right of voicing their opinions.” Reactionaries—that is, people who opposed the revolutionaries—were not people.²⁸

The life of human beings, therefore, did not have value intrinsic to itself except in its collectivity. The abstract system of the revolutionaries, into which mold a bright and shiny (if not always willing) new humanity was to be pressed: this was the sole repository of value. Nevertheless, the French Revolution invoked liberty, equality and fraternity, ideas that were to be echoed to one degree or another by all of the mutually contradictory secularist regimes of the twentieth century. Despite this, however, the





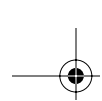
ideas were hardly given the force in real life that an outsider might have been led to expect. Partly this elusiveness was aided by the fact that liberty and equality are, in practice, mutually exclusive concepts, unless the latter is understood merely in its minimalist sense (before the law; before God; possessed of a life of equal value, etc.).

More often, though, it was the former concept, that of liberty, that was inverted into meaninglessness by the secularist creeds in the interests of a nationalist or else some supposedly egalitarian project. When Robespierre asserted, as an apologia for the French Terror, that “the government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny,” he was merely echoing the idea of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose book *The Social Contract* had spoken of “forcing men to be free.”²⁹ The Bolsheviks spoke similarly of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” And all of these self-consciously paradoxical phrases were euphemisms for force, pure and simple. They initiated a convoluted duckspeak, in which words assumed a rarefied meaning somewhat distant from, perhaps even opposite to, that of their generally accepted sense.

When Rousseau had written in 1762 of “the general will,” for violating which a person must be “forced to be free,” he seems, in the context of his words, to have meant that the political entity to which a person belongs could constrain him or her, especially in forcing the payment of taxes for the support of essential public purposes. But by using such cloudy language to do so, he opened the door to all kinds of incantatory mumbo-jumbo. The “general will” could be divorced from the actual wills of the individuals who make up the “generality” and held to be existent on the say-so of some theoretician or ideologue. Furthermore, by arrogating to themselves the ability to define true freedom, the modernist, secular ideologues had few qualms about using force to bring people into that state. Indeed, there are strong signs that Rousseau inclined in the directions his rhetoric had made possible.

Alexander Yakovlev, once a member of the Soviet Politburo but later a supporter of democracy, lamented that the French Revolution had por-

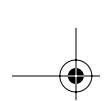




tended all of the horrors that were to come in the twentieth century: “the idealization of violence traces back to the very sources of the European revolutionary tradition.”³⁰ Robert Conquest concedes that it is possible to acquit Rousseau and even Marx of “envision[ing] mass terror,” but insists that the real point is that they were “propounding unattainable utopias” for which “any attempt to put them into practice” was possible “only . . . by such means.” Godless revolutionaries of all stripes—fascists, communists and others—came to believe it to be “in the nature of things that dictatorship and terror are needed if the good of humanity is to be served. . . . The means are acceptable, being inevitable—that is, *if* the theory is correct.”³¹ The feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir recorded that she and Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist existentialist philosopher, both rejected the French Socialist Party “firstly on the grounds that it was infiltrated by the bourgeoisie and secondly because we were temperamentally opposed to the idea of reform: society, we felt, could change only as a result of sudden cataclysmic upheaval on a global scale.”³²

For anything to change, everything had to change: this was the central conviction of the atheistic creeds. It was Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) who is credited—if that is the right word—with coining the phrase “the worse, the better.” It was adopted, like the title of his novel, *What Is to Be Done?* and like the ascetic habits and single-minded dedication to revolution of its hero, by Lenin.³³ The worse things are for the toiling masses, the more likely they are to be interested in a violent revolution. Once again, the individual lives of the workers are not what matters; the final attainment of the idealized utopian state is what counts. Even after the fall of communism, lifetime Marxists were still prepared to defend this. When the historian Eric Hobsbawm, interviewed by Michael Ignatieff in 1994, was asked whether “the loss of fifteen, twenty million people” in the manmade famines caused by collectivization of the farms in the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s “might have been justified” if the “radiant tomorrow” that the communists envisaged had been attained as a result, he immediately responded “yes.”³⁴





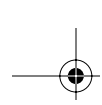
The Italian fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, went even further than the Marxists: he considered war to be unambiguously a good thing for its own sake. “It matters little who wins. To make a people great it is necessary to send them to battle even if you have to kick them in the pants. That is what I shall do.”³⁵ And, as we know, he did.

Jesus had warned (Mt 24:6) of the inevitability of wars in human affairs, but this is merely gritty realism in view of human sinfulness. The aim for all followers of Jesus is to be peace, not just in eternity after the parousia but also in the here and now, however transitory that peace may prove. That is why the peacemakers are “blessed . . . sons of God” (Mt 5:9). Mussolini’s skepticism about peace, however, is rooted in no Christian-style gritty realism; on the contrary, it is an idealization of violence that is the antithesis of the New Testament approach. “Fascism,” he insisted, “believes neither in the possibility nor the utility of perpetual peace. . . . War alone maximizes to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it.”³⁶

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893-1945), the French fascist poet and intellectual, also criticized Christianity’s repudiation of war and violence as “effeminate” and detrimental to “moral’ well-being.”³⁷ The hero of his novel *Gilles* dies in battle for fascism as a sacrifice to the ideal; the hero of another opines that “there is the Devil in God and God in the Devil. I have never made a distinction between good and evil; Christ does not. . . . Christ has his elect not because they are good but because they are his elect—beyond good and evil.” His is a religion of “the anger of love, the fury of preference.”³⁸ He wrote in 1927 that “the only life that men are capable of . . . is the effusion of blood: murder and coitus. All the rest is but the end of the road, decadence.”³⁹

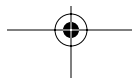
This, for fascists, was the true struggle—what Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi theorist, called the “romanticism of steel.”⁴⁰ The philosopher Ludwig Klages believed that Christianity had contributed to “the virtual extinction of the ancient Germanic nature wisdom”—a wisdom he was de-

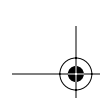




terminated to resurrect. Christ, thought Klages and his associated Nazi-inclined academics, might be acceptable if he was seen as an expression of the mystical, cosmic spirit. Belief in the historical Jesus or in the Christianity of Paul was “Jewish” and inimical to the idealization of force: “Humanity wants what is best, the fighter accomplishes what is best.”⁴¹ Logically enough, such thinkers preferred the Protestant liberal theologians of their day, who were busily deconstructing the Gospel accounts of Christ and inserting in their place an idea of God as life-force.

The first half of the twentieth century saw the appalling carnage wrought by the competing irreligious ideologies as they fought and struggled against one another. After World War II, fascism was a spent force except in very few parts of the world. But communism had rather longer to run. However, neither communism nor fascism nor their supposedly milder variants had any real basis for the sanctity of human life. Indeed, they opposed such a doctrine as mere sentiment. “To make a socialist omelet” (to cite an oft-quoted phrase among left-wing activists), “you have to break a few capitalist eggs.” To translate the metaphor: if you want to achieve the greater good of a socialist society, you have to kill capitalists and others who might stand in the way. The Soviets and, after 1948, the Chinese Maoists determined to eliminate their class enemies. And, as the historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown, once a person was designated a class enemy, the stigma could not be removed, even from that person’s descendants.⁴² In the same way, the Nazis set about killing not only German Jews, German gypsies and other “non-Aryans” but also Germans who were disabled, mentally retarded or found to be in some other way defective. Germans were supposed to be a flawless master race; the Nazi solution to the problem that this central claim flew in the face of the facts was the same as the solution of the communists. Indeed, the strategy of the Nazis and communists, faced with millions of living, breathing contradictions of their ideas, was, at heart, one and the same: to immiserate and kill them until the racists’ and socialists’ falsehoods were turned into truth and the demographic facts on the ground conformed themselves to the





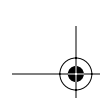
abstractions in the ideologues' heads.

It was those abstractions that mattered: the people as a theoretical construct rather than people of flesh and blood. This was understood very well by everybody involved, as the death throes of communism illustrated. On the one hand, antigovernment demonstrators in the dying days of East Germany adopted the ironic slogan “Wir sind das Volk!” (“We are the people!”) For four decades, everything had supposedly been done in the name of “the people,” in defiance of what they themselves would actually have chosen to do or to have done on their behalf. On the other hand, the Securitate (the security police) in communist Romania, who for decades had lived a secluded, privileged existence dedicated to fighting “the enemies of the people,” knew instinctively how to act when confronted by vast, universally supported demonstrations against the hated dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu: they fired on the crowds from rooftops and other vantage points. Despite their constant refrain, the Securitate had known all along that it was *they* who were, in the literal meaning of the words, the enemies of the people, and they fought a desperate last stand to keep the people down. The rhetoric had fooled no one, not even the Securitate who deployed it. Like political correctness today, it was an enforced public discourse, the real purposes of which were to render disapproved thoughts literally unspeakable and to cow ordinary people into silence about the things that mattered.

The modernist ideologies, in both their harsher and milder forms, were built on an atheistic view of humanity and of people that rendered ordinary lives dispensable and war in the cause of the abstract social ideal a positive good. As Heinrich Himmler commented,

Whether the other peoples live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our *Kultur*. Whether or not 10,000 Russian women collapse from exhaustion while digging a tank ditch interests me only in so far as the tank ditch is completed for Germany.⁴³





Boris Pasternak noted the same tendency among communists. In his massive novel about the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, one of the refrains put into the mouths of his characters is that “the personal life is dead in Russia. History has taken over.” The lives, deaths and suffering of countless individuals were of no account in the pursuit of creating an ideal society on the pages of “history.”

We noticed, early on in this chapter, that modern wars have been bloodier than anything that came before because of their modernity and the horrifying advances in humans’ ability to kill one another—and that these advances mean that not all of the blame for the carnage can be laid at the door of the secularist creeds. Nevertheless, as we have shown, those creeds took the same mechanistic view of humanity as of the machines and bureaucratic structures that were designed to enhance the process of killing. And the link between that mechanistic view and the appalling destructiveness of modern warfare is no accident. Religions have generally held human life to be sacrosanct, since pacifism is not practical as an actual policy of government, or else to have circumscribed closely the circumstances under which it may be taken away. Atheism and agnosticism, by contrast, have had no such confidence in the value of individual human beings. Neither do their modern, nontotalitarian variants show any sign of filling the void thereby created. That absence has allowed, and continues to allow, the abstract theories of ideologues to assume center stage—with catastrophic results. Irreligion has proved more lethal than religion ever was.

