

Morphing to Murder
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It is a mystery how decent, ordinary people can become murdering savages. Most human beings on a daily level just struggle to keep their families fed and are usually benign to their neighbors. But throughout history, perfectly ordinary people have been turned into rampaging mobs. Furthermore, clearly psychotic leaders can enchant otherwise rational people into following them. I have never understood the appeal of psychotics (such as Hitler) or fanatics (such as Osama bin Laden); but then I am a critical thinker who works at it---whereas large numbers of ordinary people can be led by emotional appeals.

Psychotics are thought to have a brain anomaly; they cannot empathize or love, abilities that most of us do have. But if they are intelligent and theatrical, they can appeal to normal people who would otherwise lead their lives peacefully. In addition to psychopaths who have no empathy with the pain of others, ordinary human beings can also learn to be unfeeling. A psychopath can rape with no feeling for the victim; but his followers can learn to deaden their normal feelings so that they too can rape and torture. Few torturers are born that way; most learn to do this.

World War I birthed a streak of murderous madness that has been with us throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. With psychotic leaders and followers who are willing to believe that they have the answer to creating a brave new world, we have seen the rise of totalitarianism at war with liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is messy, not always capable of solving large problems quickly, and requires too much thinking from its participants. It cannot create an instantly perfect world, but it has proven better than totalitarianism.

Totalitarian systems claim that they can fix all problems; they just need an unquestioned leader and theory of governing which they promote by killing all dissent and by brainwash their citizens from childhood. These totalitarian systems have so far been defeated---often at great cost---by a union of liberal democracies and the leadership (until now) of the United States. Italy, Japan, and Germany were defeated and all three fascist governments have been replaced by successful liberal democracies. Russia's empire collapsed after years of challenge by liberal democracy (the often unpopular Cold War), but their own liberal democracy is still wobbly. Totalitarianism is hard to kill.

I sat in a cafe in Berlin a few years ago and looked at nice people at lunch and wondered how just two generations earlier, they could have been hysterically cheering on Hitler's rantings and could have obediently (and sometimes enthusiastically) committed genocide on Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, and their own dissidents.

In Japan, I see polite, orderly people who two generations earlier raped every person (men and women) in Nanking, China and conducted themselves with horrific cruelty. Good Japanese scientists conducted mindless experiments on prisoners of war exactly as the Nazis had. How could this be?

Today, a backward Muslim world has been taken over by the latest fascism de jour, militant Islam. We understand the philosophies of Nazism and Communism, but most don't understand Islamism, which is just as murderous and fanatical as their fascist predecessors and teachers. They have declared war on us, on every non-Muslim state bordering them, going after Thais, Buddhists, Hindus, Christian Africans, and modernizing Muslims who want Islam to be a personal religion, not an ideology. They mean business. Neither murder, suicide/murder, nor genocide are out of bounds to them, nor trying to subvert modern liberal democracies, accusing all critics of being Islamophobes.

We have unwittingly promoted elections in Muslim-majority countries, not insisting on liberal democracy. We now see new governments replacing modernizing dictators with Islamist presidents who will soon be Muslim dictators.

Negotiating with totalitarians just postpones the inevitable, as we learned when Neville Chamberlain tried to negotiate with the Nazis. We are already at war, and if we realize this, these new totalitarians can also be defeated as were the last ones. We are not going to see peace in our time, but that is the price of freedom.

682 words

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