

Reflections on Nationalist Disasters

Seventy-five years ago there occurred an event, obscure at the time, from whose terrible consequences the world of 2000 AD has not yet completely recovered. The place was Munich, capital of the historic Kingdom of Bavaria and now the second city of the recently formed all-German *Reich* or Commonwealth. The time was five years after the end of World War 1, when this new would-be imperial state had been defeated, and then both punished and humiliated by the victors. What was to become the most extreme currency inflation in history had begun, fuelling the strangely inebriate climate described in the words of a contemporary economist—‘Things political and economical here are in a bigger mess than ever, the future wrapped in Egyptian darkness . . .’ By the autumn of the same year the Reichsbank would be issuing 100-trillion-mark notes, and it took a pocketful of them to buy a single US dollar.

In the darkness, reckless and despairing forces multiplied. Munich was their favoured venue, combining as it did relative economic backwardness, cultural vivacity and a particularism as yet incompletely reconciled to German unity. Many Bavarians still perceived the latter as domination by Prussia and Berlin. They distrusted the centralism of the Weimar Republic as much as its supposed leftism and openness to ‘Jewish influences’. One consequence of this was that all-German nationalism assumed an especially shrill and raucous form there. Immediately after the war an independent Bavarian Republic had been proclaimed under the leadership of the socialist Kurt Eisner, deposing the native Wittelsbach monarchy and calling on the other German states to follow its revolutionary lead. The call was not answered, and Eisner’s regime endured only a few months. What it did succeed in doing was to arouse the fear of death among the predominantly conservative cadres of the stately old capital on the Isar, as well as in Bavaria’s 80 per cent Catholic countryside.

The significance of that milieu for the rise of German fascism has been underlined in a remarkable new study by Professor David Large, *Where Ghosts Walked: Munich’s Road to the Third Reich*.¹ His title comes from Stephan George’s poem on the city, evoking the *Frauenkirche* or Kirk of Our Lady, in sight of whose spires alone the true *Münchner* feels at home

¹ David Clay Large, *Where Ghosts Walked: Munich’s Road to the Third Reich*, Norton, New York & London 1997, £23 hb.

on a 'soil as yet untouched by bane, in the town of folk and youth'. Within its charmed walls amiable ghosts from the past still walked in broad daylight, and blessed or consecrated the present. Later on, the greatest of Munich writers, Thomas Mann, was to give a bitterly different picture of those same ghosts. Are they not also the darkly mediaeval spirit of 'Kaisersaschern' in *Doktor Faustus*—the well of the Devil himself, whose waters flow through Adrian Leverkühn's hypnotic music before driving him to madness and death?

The Birth of a Wolf

'How is it... that everything rotten and unable to maintain itself elsewhere was magically pulled towards Munich?', asked novelist Leon Feuchtwanger, driven from the city by anti-Semitic persecution. While Berlin was becoming one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities, he mused, Munich slid irresistibly into provincialism and bloody-minded racism. Among those drawn to the Bavarian capital was would-be architect Adolf Hitler. Originally a draft-dodger from the Hapsburg Empire, he joined the Bavarian army instead and became a trench-messenger during the war. We know why he liked Munich. 'A heartfelt love seized me for this city', he wrote in the 1920s, '...what a difference from Vienna! I grew sick to my stomach when I even thought back on that Babylon of races... Most of all I was attracted by this wonderful marriage of primordial power and fine artistic mood... [which] remains inseparably bound up with the development of my own life'. The terms are interesting. Much later on 'primordial' became the customary term for theories ascribing an ethnic or pre-modern foundation to nineteenth- and twentieth-century nation-states. The artistic mood was that of a mind capable, in something like Benedict Anderson's contemporary sense, of imagining national community along just such lines—through the hypnotic rear-view mirror of feigned retrospect and mythology.²

He returned from the Bavarian army in 1919 as a 'political education agent'—in effect, a political snitch paid to infiltrate new political organizations and report back to the Bavarian government. One of these was a small gang of (mainly) war veterans calling itself the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or Workers' Party. It numbered only a few dozen but was seen as having anti-Bolshevik 'potential'. The bosses encouraged their agent to join and help fund and then lead it; and a few months later it was able to stage a successful mass meeting in the *Hofbräuhaus*, a city-centre beer-cellar. There something astounding happened.

The sickly-looking Austrian spoke for the first time before a large audience, announcing the movement's new twenty-five-point radical programme while his fellow-members held opponents at bay with truncheons and well-aimed beer-mugs. The platform included nationalization of trusts and the confiscation of war profits, but that was not what gripped the listeners. It was the voice itself—a raucous, snarling furnace-blast from some scarcely human region, sounding indeed like the echo of primordial will, over-riding every doubt and liberal scruple. The

² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1991.

Workers' Party (later the National-Socialist Party, or 'Nazis' for short in the Munich vernacular) had made its mark. Its leader wrote afterwards: 'When I finally closed the meeting, I was not alone in thinking that a wolf had been born that was destined to break into the herd of deceivers and misleaders of the people'.

The Wolf's True Lair

In time that wolf was to enslave the people of all Germany, slaughter much of European Jewry and come within measurable distance of world domination. But as David Large argues, its womb lay in Munich, and it was with good reason that Hitler insisted this city was the spiritual home of the Third Reich. After its monstrous birth, the NSDAP grew into a mass movement capable of taking over the whole city-centre for its first party rally in January 1923. Some months previously, Mussolini's Italian Fascist Party had leapt into power following the march on Rome, and pressure mounted for a comparable coup in Bavaria. Now supported by significant parts of the Munich establishment, the Nazis planned a three-day political carnival to culminate on Sunday, 28 January. Conservative historian Karl Alexander von Müller attended its main event, and published a memoir about it. He recalled how 'the hot breath of hypnotic mass enthusiasm' attained its unexampled climax as Hitler led his entourage through the shouting masses:

He passed very close to me and I saw this was a different person from the one I had met here and there in private houses: his narrow, pale features were concentrated in wrath, cold flames leapt from his piercing eyes, which seemed to search left and right for possible enemies, as if to cast them down. Was it the mass audience that gave him this uncanny power? Or did he empower the audience with his own inner strength?³

This was the first of the Party Days which, after 1933, were turned into great state and media occasions. The best known is that of 1934, filmed by régime cinematographer Leni Riefenstahl as *Triumph of the Will*. But the triumphalist path was laid eleven years before, when the party occupied and defended its original lair against rivals and opponents, with the connivance of a local élite more afraid of 'Jewish Bolshevism' and heartless capitalism than of those claiming to voice ancestral blood and instinct.

What was the source of the latter's hypnotic power? On a personal level the physical voice was obviously important. Innumerable commentators would remark, like Müller, on Hitler's insignificance and ordinariness. But part of his authority must have lain in the sheer contrast between these features and his vocal cords. When he projected his voice in public it was as if the 'wolf was released, its power bizarrely amplified by the banality of the source. Chaplin's mocking film *The Great Dictator* concentrated on the latter, but could not of course reproduce the former. As Marshall McLuhan observed in the 1960s, the voice was coincidentally appropriate to the new communication age just then being inaugurated by radio.

³ Karl Alexander von Müller, *Erinnerungen 1919–1932*, Munich 1966, as quoted by Large, p. 165.

Where Ghosts Walked throws more light upon one specific and important factor in the equation. Large's emphasis on Bavaria suggests how the specific toxins of German nationalism arose partly out of a fierce, sometimes almost irresolvable, tension between locality and centralized power. Detestation of Berlin and Prussia was endemic among Bavarians, and heartily reciprocated in the Prussian counter-myth of Munich as a Hicksville of beer-swilling cretins, second-rate painters and slaves to the crucifix. In fact, there were Nazis who despaired of Hitler's obsession with the South—at one point Goebbels even proposed expelling 'the petit-bourgeois Hitler' from the movement unless he shook off its pernicious influence.

But what the Austrian 'outsider' may have instinctively grasped was the fruitfulness of that very tension. The wide disparities of Germany—a loose collection of smaller kingdoms until only one generation previously—could only be fused effectively together by a violently addictive ideology, through beliefs imbued with the force of traditional religion, plus the most modern media-techniques. And the materials for this forging process were most conspicuously present in Munich.

The Wilhelmine *Reich* had been a hastily-assembled and ramshackle structure, still haunted by the shades of mediaevalism. Its defeat in 1918 and the subsequent crazy economic landslides of 1922–23 and 1929 fostered a special sort of disorientation, where these ghosts were at once reanimated, quite unreconciled to the new Republic, and yet had nowhere to retreat to. In Large's account, Bavarian separatism haunted every moment of Munich politics—yet almost no one really wanted to risk a return to the Wittelsbach monarchy. But at the same time the Nazis dangled a heady escape-route before those caught in this dilemma: they suggested that *Bayern* could become the font of true 'Germanness', within which rural backwardness would be magically changed into universal mission—into a redemptive crusade to fuse province with *Reich*, then Germany with the world. The biological science of the period supposedly guaranteed the deal. And now the contract was enunciated by a voice unleashed from some outer—or was it inner?—exultant darkness, the clamorous shriek of Beelzebub himself.

The Broader Picture

A wider historical and theoretical problem is also implicitly addressed by Professor Large's argument. In most accounts of the development of nationalism, the processes of Italian and German unification have figured in a highly favourable light. Even liberal or left-leaning histories generally stern about 'narrow nationalism' have viewed the late nineteenth-century Italian and German states with approval—indisputably progressive victories over 'feudalism', the bringing together of unviable petty statelets. Does not such 'modernization' in some way prefigure present day demands, when, again, nation-states ought to be joining up rather than breaking up?⁴

⁴ I have further explored these issues in my recent book, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited*, Verso, London 1997.

But there was always an awkward downside to the bland vision, and it is here that *Where Ghosts Walked* has most relevance. Regrettably, both these great and exemplary unification projects ended in Fascism. Indeed they invented the beast. Was this just bad luck? Anything but, if one reinterprets the rise of Hitlerism more circumspectly, with more careful attention to its regional and national roots. After he got out of Munich, Thomas Mann denounced the degeneration of his city's culture into 'high-flown, wishy-washy cant, full of mystical euphoria with hyphenated prefixes like race- and folk- and fellowship-', but he failed to underline sufficiently how the cant responded to the profound moral failure of the Wilhelmine state. Similarly, Italian Fascism—with equally strong regional roots, a comparable charismatic chieftain and quasi-military organization—demolished *Risorgimento* liberalism and the Savoy monarchy by 'marching on Rome' (or more exactly, by threatening to).

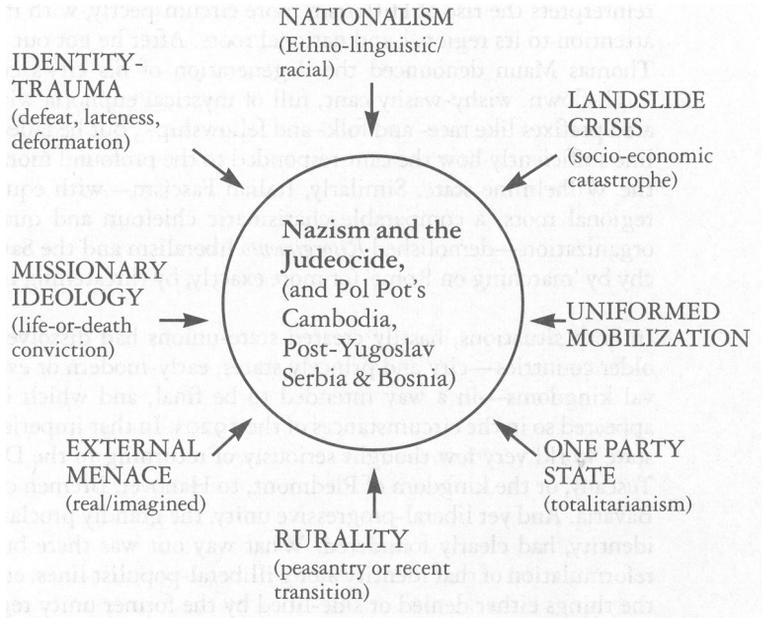
In both situations, hastily created state-unions had dissolved a host of older countries—city and princely states, early-modern or even mediaeval kingdoms—in a way intended to be final, and which indeed still appeared so in the circumstances of the 1920s. In that imperialist or big-state world very few thought seriously of returning to the Dukedom of Tuscany, or the kingdom of Piedmont, to Hanover, Bremen city-state or Bavaria. And yet liberal-progressive unity, the grandly proclaimed wider identity, had clearly foundered. What way out was there but a drastic reformulation of that identity along illiberal-populist lines, emphasizing the things either denied or side-lined by the former unity regimes? But such emphasis demanded an oneiric or even inebriate style, since in conditions of crisis only the headiest concoction had a hope of transcending the gross regional/national contrasts still alive over both territories.

It should also be remembered that high-flown mystical euphoria about *Volk* and race gained an added electrical charge *from the conversion-process itself*. This is what Hitler and Mussolini counted on, and it becomes much more visible on the smaller scale. A Lombard or a Sicilian, a Rhinelander or a Bavarian who bought into being 'Italian' or 'German' in their new fantasized sense would almost certainly do so to excess. Repression of one identity-format is best achieved by fanatical embrace of another—something quite familiar in Britain, in Welsh, Irish and Scottish conditions. In the post-World War I era the available formula for such non-democratic 'rebirth' was provided by Social Darwinism and the mythology of pre-scientific genetics—ideas then quite widely held, we should not forget, in the UK, France and America as well. In fact they were pretty influential in the British Labour Party, as shown in the early career of Harold Laski. The Kramnick-Sheerman biography showed to what an astonishing extent the early life of both Laski and his wife Frida Kerry was dominated by the eugenics movement.⁵

However, another lesson in David Large's story is the sheer complexity of the conditions needed to generate disaster on that scale. In other circumstances the same ideas led to quite different consequences—or, as in Britain, just evaporated in the face of new challenges. Blaming such catastrophes on 'nationalism' alone is as much use as blaming a violent storm

⁵ I. Kramnick and B. Sheerman, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left*, London 1993.

on the weather. If one looks comparatively at some twentieth-century cataclysms, then a tentative diagram of their causation might look something like this:



The analogy used for this model is that of a thermo-nuclear fusion process (with apologies to Donald McKenzie).⁶ Sometimes thought to be achievable in shorthand—as in the myth (if that is what it is) of the ‘suit-case bomb’—such reactions depend in fact upon a wide range of necessary conditions. These can be assembled, fortunately, only by exceptional means, and even then temporarily. While no precise social or historical analogy is possible, I think one can say that a similarly wide range of precipitating factors is needed for the disastrous societal ‘explosions’ which have brought about genocidal or ethnic-cleansing pandemonium, and closer-range studies like *Where Ghosts Walked* or Ben Kiernan’s *The Pol Pot Regime* make this a lot more obvious.⁷

In a more distant or superficial perspective ‘nationalism’—in the sense of ethnic or racial nationalism—has often been made the main, or even the sole, cause of such disasters. Argument then goes round in inescapable circles. If ethno-nationalist politics is responsible for the horror, and (as most broad-brush analysts tend also to believe) is ‘inescapable’ and recurrent, then history settles down into the sad business of waiting for ‘the next time’, and doing one’s, probably futile, best to exorcise fate in advance. But actually this is little more than headline-history, in the service of a deeply conservative world-view.

⁶ Donald McKenzie, *Knowing Machines: Essays on Technical Change*, Cambridge, Mass. 1996 ch.10; ‘Tacit Knowledge and the Uninvention of Nuclear Weapons’, especially p. 220.

⁷ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge*, New Haven 1996.

The most salient ideological feature of such crises is some form of nationalist belief, which is presumably why it gets seized on as the culprit. However, its critical impact has been inseparable from two accompanying conditions (left and right from the top, in the diagram): a structural 'identity' cramp or developmental antagonism, and a recent or ongoing 'landslide' instilling deep personal fears—a sense of the societal earth actually giving way. David Large gives a vivid idea of how these functioned in 1920s Bavaria. In the two other examples used here, we know what the equivalents were: for Cambodians, an historical dread of disappearance, followed closely by being carpet-bombed 'into the Stone Age'; for the ex-Yugoslavs, the repressed inheritance of Greater-Serb identity, reanimated in circumstances of both state and economic collapse.

Yet even these conditions might not have generated catastrophes without some or all of the other factors indicated in the graphic as the 'missionary' or crusading mentality capable of turning national aspiration into a version of imperialism, and an associated 'foreign foe' used to foster such paranoia. Psychologically, the two things have usually been linked together by the fixed idea of 'life or death'—that is, the communal and threatened existence (in which individuals feel a personal stake) that appears sustainable only by an external drive against those bent on the people's death.

Looking to the right of the diagram: it is also significant that *uniforms* figure prominently in most situations of this kind: they are a way of both legitimating and advertising violently radical aims. Hence either military or para-military formations have canalized and taken over most ethnic violence, and the biggest offenders have been, not surprisingly, those of the state—with Indian 'communist' violence as the most important exception. But 'the state' in most cases has meant 'the Party': all such cataclysms have *also* been struggles either to obtain one-party autocracy (Germany) or to reinforce and preserve it (Cambodia, Serbia-Yugoslavia and Rwanda). The Party in turn can function only through an autocratic Leader.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that this complex reconfiguration of ethno-nationalism has normally had a powerfully rural or small-town foundation. This has often tended to be overlooked, partly through misunderstanding of the all-powerful German example. It is easy for modern commentators to forget just how rural the Germany of Hitler and Heidegger was, above all the South Germany portrayed in Large's book. He depicts what today cannot help seeming a largely different and lost Central European world. As he is careful to underline in the Epilogue, the wolf's lair of Nazism was far removed indeed from today's Munich, one of the greatest industrial conurbations in Europe. Back in the 1920s it was still the overgrown, easy-going 'county-town' of a largely peasant culture. Cambodia of the 1970s and Rwanda of the 1990s were virtually 100 per cent peasant nations. At the moment of Yugoslav collapse, both Bosnia and Serbia remained far less touched by a process of halting industrialization than many outside observers realized—is this not why they were able to produce a 'village war' uncompleted in the present decade?

This element may also help us towards a tentative general chronology of ethno-nationalist disaster. Such explosions have been intimately linked to the moment of rural-urban transition—'moment' here meaning not

'instant' but a world-historical phase, possibly multi-generational in duration and yet with a determinable beginning and end. In it wolves like Mussolini, Hitler, Milosevic, Pol Pot and General Habyarimana were born. They were products less of the countryside and peasant culture than of the new lairs of forced passage, in which ancient attitudes and reflexes conducted a survival-battle against modernity, of necessity emotionally violent and rooted in an idealized past time. These were also among the 'ghosts' of Large's book, and sometimes they won, for a time. But if some of them are still around, or pending, at least we can see they are not inscribed in human nature or history. All their baleful presence implies is that the 'moment', in the complex sense I have tried to indicate—modernization, urbanization and their up-dated descendant 'globalization'—is itself far from over.