

# **THE UNFINISHED** **TWENTIETH CENTURY** **WHAT WE HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT** **NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

By Jonathan Schell

## **A TALE OF THREE AUGUSTS**

**A**n age ended, we know, when the Berlin Wall fell, auguring, soon after, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But which age was it? The Cold War was over—that much was clear. Yet many felt and understood that some longer historical period, or perhaps several, had also come to a close. One clear candidate is the age of totalitarianism—a period coextensive with the life of the Soviet Union, which bracketed the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. (China’s current government, which has evolved into a strange hybrid that some are calling “market communism,” is the only one of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century that has not actually been overthrown.) Another candidate is the age of world wars; which, as suggested by the war that remained cold, have been rendered unwinnable and therefore unlikely by the invention of nuclear weapons. And when the histories of the two world wars and the two great totalitarian regimes are considered together, they form a third candidate—an age that many historians are now calling the “short twentieth century.” The calendar’s divisions of the years, they’ve observed, match up inexactly with history’s turning points. According to this way of reckoning, the nineteenth century began not in 1800 but in 1789, with the French Revolution, and came to its close not in 1900 but in 1914, when the First World War broke out, putting an end to the so-called long nineteenth century. The twentieth century, having begun in August of 1914, lasted only until the failed hard-line Communist coup in Moscow in 1991, which, in another pivotal August of the twentieth century, set in motion the Soviet collapse. Some years before, the Russian poet, Akhmatova had expressed a similar idea:

Snowdrifts covered the Nevskii Prospect . . .  
And along the legendary quay,  
There advanced, not the calendar,  
But the real Twentieth Century

It is this real twentieth century—the twentieth century of the Somme, of the Gulag, of the Holocaust—that in 1991 startled the world, the historians are now saying, by turning out to be short. On either side of it were the, calmer seas of a predominantly liberal civilization. A bolder

assertion of this notion was Francis Fukuyama's renowned claim that the liberal restoration of 1991 marked the "end of history"—by which he meant not that the end of days had arrived but, only a little more modestly, that humanity's long search for the best form of government had reached its destination in a nearly global embrace of liberal democracy.

The distinction between the real twentieth century and the calendrical one is based on the convincing idea that the century's bouts of unprecedented violence, both within nations and between them, possess a definite historical coherence—that they constitute, to put it simply, a single story. The proposed periodization is clearly optimistic, suggesting that the tide of bloodshed has reached its high-water mark and is now receding. The failure of the Cold War to become hot and the liquidation in 1991 of the world's last thoroughly totalitarian regime lend substance to the hope. I wish to suggest, however, that this appraisal remains starkly incomplete if it fails to take into account one more age that reached a turning point in 1991. I mean the nuclear age, which opened in another epochal August of the twentieth century, August of 1945. (Somehow in this century August was the month in which history chose to produce a disproportionately large number of its most important events.) No narrative of the extraordinary violence of the twentieth century can possibly be told without taking into account the greatest means of violence ever created.

The Greeks used to say that no man should be called happy before he died. They meant not only that even the most contented life could be undone by the last minute but also that the meaning of an entire life might depend on its ending. For a life's last chapter was not merely an event, with its freight of suffering or joy; it was a disclosure, in whose light the story's beginning and middle might need to be drastically rewritten. Or, to vary the metaphor, stories, including the stories of historical epochs, are like pictures of heavenly constellations drawn by connecting dots—in this case, historical facts. The addition of new dots may merely add detail to the picture that has already taken shape, but it may also alter the entire image. The swan will turn out to be a crab; what looked like a whale turns into a dragon. Such was the case, certainly, with the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. The Soviet Union's infirmities, we now must suppose, were eating away at its power long before, one fine day in 1991, the empire evaporated. It is understandable that contemporaries are usually startled by events, but historians have no right to present surprise endings to the tales they tell. Their new job will be to retell the story of the Soviet Union in such a way that the sudden collapse at the end makes sense.

So it must eventually be with the nuclear age. The story of a Cold War that was the scene of history's only nuclear arms race will be very different from the story of a Cold War that turned out to be only the first of many interlocking nuclear arms races in many parts of the world. The nuclear dilemma, in sum, hangs like a giant question mark over our waning century. To 1914 and 1991 two dates therefore need to be added. The first is 1945 and the second is the as yet unknown future date on which the end of the nuclear age will be disclosed. Whether this conclusion will be the elimination of nuclear weapons (either before or after their further use) or, conceivably, the elimination of the species that built them is the deepest of the questions that need answering when we consider the still-open book of the real twentieth century.

**I**n the United States, the historians' oversight is only one symptom of a wider inattention to the nuclear question. In the years of the post-Cold War period, the nuclear peril seemed to all but disappear from public awareness. Some of the reasons were understandable. As long as the Cold

War lasted, and seemed almost indistinguishable from nuclear danger—the more so since both looked they were going to last indefinitely. One half of this assumption was of course negated by the Soviet collapse. For a while, the public seemed to imagine that nuclear danger, too, had unexpectedly proven ephemeral. The political antagonism that had produced the only nuclear terror Americans had ever known had, after really ended with the Cold War. The prospect of a second Cuban Missile Crisis became remote. It was reasonable for a while to imagine that the end of the struggle in whose name nuclear weapons had been built would lead to their end. Perhaps it would happen quietly and smoothly. The Comprehensive Test Treaty would be accepted and succeeded by reductions. START II would be ratified and followed by START III, START III by START IV (at some point the lesser nuclear powers would be drawn into the negotiations), and so on, until the last warhead was gone. American presidents encouraged the public complacency. “I saw the chance to rid our children’s dreams of the nuclear nightmare, and I did,” President George Bush said at the Republican convention 1992; and in 1997, President Bill Clinton boasted that “our children are growing up free from the shadows of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear holocaust.”

The news media took their cue from this official fantasy. Nuclear weapons all but dropped out of the news and opinion pages. In the decade since the Berlin Wall was torn down, newspaper readers and television viewers were given little indication that some 31,000 nuclear weapons remained in the world, or that 6,000 of them were targeted at the United States. A whole generation came of age lacking even rudimentary information regarding nuclear arms and nuclear peril. On the tenth anniversary of the end of wall, few commentators taking stock of the decade bothered to mention the persistence of nuclear danger.

A frightening new landscape was coming into view. To begin with, the presidents who said they had ended nuclear danger had not acted that way. Clinton’s repeated though little-reported “bottom up” reviews of defense policy left the strategy of nuclear deterrence—and the arsenals it justified—untouched. His spokesmen let it be known that nuclear weapons were to remain the foundation of American security for the indefinite future. Russia followed suit—abandoning a willingness expressed by Gorbachev to eliminate nuclear weapons and stalling on the ratification of the START II Treaty. And so the nuclear arsenals of the Cold War, instead of withering away with the disappearance of that conflict, were delivered intact, like a package from a deceased sender, into the new age, though now lacking the benefit of new justification—or, for that matter, of new opposition.

Meanwhile, newcomers to the nuclear game moved to acquire the weapons. If nuclear powers such as Russia and the United States, which no longer had a quarrel, were entitled to maintain nuclear arsenals, why not countries that, like India and Pakistan, were chronically at war? To insist otherwise would, in the words of India’s foreign minister Jaswant Singh, be to shut the Third World out of the “nuclear paradigm” established by the First and Second Worlds, and so to accept “nuclear apartheid.” In May of 1998, India and Pakistan, accordingly, fired off their rival salvos of nuclear tests. The antagonism between the Soviet Union and the United States had been “cold,” but this conflict was hot. The three wars that the two countries had fought since the late 1940s were in short order followed by a fourth in the summer of 1999. The world’s multiplying nuclear arsenals were meanwhile supplemented by a new prominence of their repellent siblings in the family of weapons of mass destruction—chemical and biological weapons, which may become the instrument of choice of nations or terrorist groups worried about the expense and difficulty of making nuclear weapons.

By the century's end, the web of arms-control agreements that had been painstakingly woven during the last half century of the Cold War was tearing apart. The United States Senate voted down the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—an act that cut away the foundation of several decades of effort by the United States to halt the spread of nuclear weapons. The Senate also persuaded the Clinton Administration to develop a national missile defense, which would violate the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, thereby threatening to turn Russia's stalling on the START negotiations into outright opposition. The combined resolve of the five senior nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, England, France, and China) to keep their arsenals and of other countries to obtain them likewise threatened the breakdown of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, under which 180 countries have agreed to forgo nuclear weapons in exchange for promises by the nuclear powers to abolish theirs.

From the very first moments of the nuclear age, scientists have warned the world that it is in the nature of nuclear technology—as of all technology—to become universally available and therefore that, in the absence of political will, the world would tend to become nuclear-armed. In a world boiling with local (and not so local) hatreds, the retrogression of arms control raises the question of whether the Cold War, instead of being the high point of danger in a waning nuclear age, will prove to have been a mere bipolar rehearsal for a multipolar second nuclear age.

A number of voices challenged this status quo by calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, but their views went largely unreported by the news media that had ignored the dangers of which they warned. Among these voices were leaders of the traditional anti-nuclear peace movement; the seven governments of the New Agenda coalition, composed of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, and South Africa; and an impressive array of retired military officers and civilian leaders, including President Jimmy Carter, Senator Alan Cranston, former commander of the Strategic Air Command General George Lee Butler, and the commander of the allied air forces in the Gulf War, General Charles Horner. In a series of reports and statements, these people have argued that the end of the Cold War has provided a historically unique but perishable opportunity to remove nuclear danger by eliminating nuclear arsenals everywhere. (Since only eight nations possess nuclear weapons, and of these only India, Pakistan, and Israel have not signed the Nonproliferation Treaty, abolition means persuading just three nations to live as would the 185 signatories.) Notable among the new abolitionists were some of the most hawkish figures of the Cold War, including Paul Nitze, drafter in 1950 of National Security Council Memorandum-68, regarded by many as the charter of American Cold War policy. He recently argued that the United States' huge lead in the development of high-precision weaponry created a new military context in which the United States simply did not need nuclear weapons. Considering this advantage, Nitze could “think of no circumstances under which it would be wise for the United States to use nuclear weapons,” and therefore recommended that the nation “unilaterally get rid” of them. The emergence of this hawkish strain of abolitionism, in which precision, high-explosive conventional bombing would give the United States a usable military superiority that nuclear weapons could never confer, assured that, should the idea of abolition ever take hold, a debate within the ranks' of the abolitionists themselves would be robust. But Nitze's dramatic proposal fell into the media silence that had swallowed up all other proposals for abolition.

## PREFACE TO A CENTURY

It seems timely, then, to take a fresh look at the nuclear question in the context of the century that has just ended. The exercise, we can hope, will shed light on both the nuclear dilemma and the story of the century, short or otherwise, in which nuclear weapons have played, and unfortunately go on playing, so important a part. One place to begin is with a work that, as it happens, was first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in London, at the turn of the last century, in 1899: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad wrote in the heyday of a liberal civilization that had seemed to spread steadily and grow stronger for most of the nineteenth century. Its articles of faith were that science and technology were the sources of a prosperity without limits; that the free market would spread the new abundance across the boundaries of both classes and nations; that liberty and democracy, already established in several of the most powerful and advanced nations, were gaining ground almost everywhere; and that all of these forces were welling an unstoppable tide of overall human progress. It is, of course, a revival of these ideas—minus, notably, the idea of progress—that has inspired the belief that the twentieth century; or even history itself, ended in 1991. Conrad was not an acolyte of this faith. He was perhaps the most acute among a number of observers who, having witnessed firsthand what the “civilized” countries were doing in the “backward” parts of the world, where colonialism was at its zenith, discerned the shape of a radically different future. *Heart of Darkness* was many things. It was a tale of travel to an exotic place. It was a glimpse through the eyes of the seaman Marlow, of the atrocities committed by King Leopold's International Association of the Congo. It was an investigation by literary means of the extremes of evil. And it was, as we today are in a position to appreciate, a topographic map, clairvoyant in its specificity, of the moral landscape of the twentieth century.

“It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmare's,” Marlow says of his sea journey to the Congo along the African coast. The hinted nightmares turned out to be the waking experience of the century ahead. That century, Conrad apparently understood, was about to open up new possibilities for evil. In *Heart of Darkness*, he seems to thumb through them prospectively as if through a deck of horrific tarot cards. The concentration camps are there. The black men “dying slowly,” “in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair,” whom Marlow witnesses in a grove of trees immediately upon arriving at an outer station, are unmistakable precursors of the millions of men and women who were to die in the concentration camps soon to be built in Europe. The monster Kurtz, the charismatic station chief who murders in the name of progress, and who, although “hollow at the core,” was gifted with magnificent eloquence and “electrified large meetings,” is a sort of prefiguration of Hitler. Conrad even has a Belgian journalist comment that Kurtz would have made a “splendid leader of an extreme party.” Which one? “Any party,” is the answer. For, the journalist stammers, “he was an—an—extremist.” But Kurtz is not to be understood as a fringe character.” All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” Marlow says, in a rare moment of editorializing.

Consider, by way of inexplicably refined forecasting; the likeness of some of Marlow's comments about Kurtz to some comments Hitler makes about himself in 1936. The power of Hitler's voice, carried to the German public over the radio, was a basic element of his power. Conrad notes something similar in Kurtz. Marlow:

Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last.

Yet beneath the rich and resonant voice lay an emptiness:

The voice was gone. What else had been there?

And, for comparison, Hitler speaking at a rally in 1936 about his appeal to the German people:

At this hour do we not again feel the miracle that has brought us together! Long ago you heard the voice of a man, and it struck to your hearts, it awakened you, and you followed this voice. You followed it for years, without so much as having seen him whose voice it was; you heard only a voice, and you followed.

To give just one more example, anyone who witnessed the monotonous, ceaseless American artillery fire into “free-fire zones” in Vietnam will experience a shock of recognition in the following description of a French naval vessel firing into the African jungle:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight.

Nor did Conrad fail to take note of those indispensable props of the gigantic, insane, state-sponsored crimes of our time: the obedient functionaries. The “banality” of their evil, famously described after the fact by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, is foreshadowed in Conrad’s description of a minor bureaucrat in the ivory-gathering operation at the Central Station. This man, mistaking Marlow for an influential figure, curries favor with him, prompting Marlow to observe, “I let him run on, this papier-mache Mephistopheles.” He adds, “It seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.” Conrad described well the humiliation that so many decent people were to experience in having to take ridiculous personages seriously solely because of the immense suffering they were causing. Face to face with Kurtz in the jungle at night, Marlow comments, “I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonoring necessity.” The inspired anti-Nazi diarist Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, who was executed by the Nazis in 1944, experienced a similar feeling of humiliation when he thought back to an accidental encounter he had once had with another atrocious phantom-Hitler. “If I had had an inkling of the role this piece of filth was to play, and of the years of suffering he was to make us endure,” he wrote, “I would have done it [shot him] without a second thought. But I took him for a character out of a comic strip, and did not shoot.”

The most remarkable and telling augury of *Heart of Darkness*, however, was the glimpse that Conrad, vaulting ahead in prophecy to 1945, provided of the destination toward which all these preposterous and terrifying tendencies somehow were heading; namely, the threat that, with

the help of the Kurtzes of this world, the human species might one day get ready to wipe itself off the face of the earth. After his climactic meeting with Kurtz in the jungle, Marlow further comments, "There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces." This foreboding of annihilation was no incidental feature of the work; it returns several times, always at critical moments in the story. The most renowned passage in which it occurs is the legendary addendum "Exterminate all the brutes" that Kurtz pinned to the bottom of the dithyramb to nineteenth-century progress that he left as his legacy. The foreboding recurs even more explicitly when, after Kurtz has died and Marlow is on his way to inform Kurtz's betrothed of the fact, he reports, "I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind." The technical means for destroying the species lay far in the future, but the psychological and moral preparations, it appears, were well under way in 1899.

### **THE FIRST AUGUST: THE BEGINNING OF THE REAL TWENTIETH CENTURY**

As the scholar Jessica Reifer has pointed out, Conrad's intimations in a single text of virtually all the unprecedented evils, including the threat of self-extinction, that Western humanity was about to visit upon itself and the world in the twentieth century are evidence before the fact of their common roots and essential unity. These "hints for nightmares," however, did not materialize into real historical events in Europe until, during the first of the century's fateful Augusts, the First World War broke out. Then the nightmares followed, one after another, in a chain whose unusually clear linkage points to the underlying continuity.

The judgment that the outbreak of the First World War was the starting point in the twentieth century's plunge into horror did not originate with the inventors of the idea of the short twentieth century; it has been the belief of a remarkably wide consensus of historians. George Kennan spoke for this consensus in his diplomatic history *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order*:

With the phenomenon of the Second World War before me, it was borne in upon me to what overwhelming extent the determining phenomena of the interwar period, Russian Communism and German Nazism and indeed then the Second World War itself, were the products of that first great holocaust of 1914-18. . . . And thus I came to see the First World War . . . as the great seminal catastrophe of the century. . . .

As Kennan suggests, the stories of the two world wars on the one hand and of the two great totalitarian regimes on the other were as tightly intertwined at every crucial juncture as the proteins on the strands of a double helix. Total war and totalitarianism were kin in more than name. From 1914 onward, each fed the other in a vicious spiral of violence. To begin with, the shock of the First World War is widely understood to have created the social conditions essential to the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In the words of the historian Martin Malia, "This war disorganized Russia's still immature political structures to the point where the

Bolshevik Party, a throwback to the violent and conspiratorial politics of the 1870s, was about to seize power. Many understood even at the time that the brutality of the war had been carried over to the system of rule that followed. As the contemporary socialist Victor Chernov put it, “The moral nature of the Bolshevik Revolution was inherited from the war in which it was born.”

That the Nazis’ rise to power in Germany was made possible by the war is also accepted widely. It will be enough here—without trying to recount the story of the destabilization of German politics and society by her defeat and the harsh terms of the peace settlement—to recall two comments made by Hitler. The first is his remark that “if at the beginning of the war twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas, as happened to hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers in the field, the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.” The idea of killing Jews by gas was not one that Hitler, who had been a victim of an English gas attack, was to forget. The second comment is his description of his reaction to the declaration of the First World War. “Even today,” he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “I am not ashamed to say that, overpowered by stormy enthusiasm, I fell down on my knees and thanked Heaven from an overflowing heart.”

If in the century’s Teens and Twenties total war prepared the way for totalitarianism, in the Thirties, when Hitler carried out the series of aggressions that brought on the Second World War, the process worked the other way around. Hitler’s biographers tell us that while at the front in the First World War he felt so much at home in the trenches and so ill at ease in civilian society that he canceled all his leaves. For him, it seems, not war but peace was hell, and there is a sense in which the interwar period was just one more leave that was canceled by a peace-weary Hitler.

The plainest of these links, finally, is that between the war against Hitler and the decision by the United States and England to build atomic weapons. In October of 1939 (more than two years before the United States went to war with Germany and Japan), when the businessman Alexander Sachs visited President Franklin Roosevelt to recommend an atomic-weapons program, Roosevelt commented, “Alex, what you are after is to see that the Nazis don’t blow us up.” Sachs replied, “Precisely.” Throughout the war, the scientists at Los Alamos—many of them refugees from Europe—held before their eyes the prospect that Hitler would succeed in building the bomb first.

Evil, even when opposed, has a way of preparing the ground for more evil, and Hitler by this route became a progenitor of the bomb. His extraordinary malevolence induced his adversaries to embrace an evil that otherwise they conceivably might have forgone. Through this indirect paternity were reborn key aspects, of the policies that he, more than anyone else, had pioneered. As in a magic trick—appropriately accompanied by a gigantic world-blinding flash and (mushroom-shaped) puff of smoke—the politics of mass annihilation, even as they were going down to defeat in Hitler’s bunker; were in 1945 transferred to the care of Washington.

## **EXTERMINATION**

**W**hat was the nature of the new possibilities for evil that Conrad had discerned in the Congo and that the series of calamities inaugurated by the war in 1914 brought, as if through the action of a pendulum swinging in an ever-widening arc; to fuller and fuller realization, until the human species created weapons whereby it could destroy itself? Violence on a previously unimaginable

scale was the obvious common denominator. This violence was the basis for the increasing use of that lingua franca of twentieth-century politics, terror—terror as an instrument of rule, which is to say totalitarian rule; terror as a strategy of war, and especially of “strategic” bombing, aimed at breaking the morale of civilian populations; and, finally, nuclear terror, rather optimistically referred to as a “balance of terror.” (Terror in nuclear strategy, let us note, is terror in not only its most extensive but also its purest form, inasmuch as its practitioners sometimes imagine that it can be projected forever without actual use of the instruments that produce it.) But something more than a colossal increase in violence and terror was involved. In Kurtz’s phrase “Exterminate all the brutes,” Conrad gives us the concept we need: extermination. The capacity and will to destroy not just large numbers of people but entire classes of people was the new invention. Policies of extermination, of course, require slaughter on a mass scale, but they aim at more than slaughter. By seeking to eradicate defined human collectivities, extermination aims not only at those groups but at their progeny, who are shut out of existence when the policy succeeds. The distinction is basic. Mass slaughter is a crime against the living; extermination is, in addition, a crime against the future. When Hitler launched the Final Solution, his target was not just the living Jews but all future Jews together with the culture they had created and, if they were permitted to live, would go on creating. Murder is a crime that, by destroying individual lives, violates the legal and moral order of a community; extermination is a crime that, by destroying an entire community, is a crime against the family of communities that make up humankind—a crime; as international law has come to recognize, “against humanity.”

Genocide—the destruction of a people, whether defined as a race or a tribe or a nation—is the quintessential act of extermination, but it is not the only one. Another is the extermination of social classes, practiced by Stalin and Mao Zedong and Pol Pot, among others. In the Bolsheviks’ very first year in power, they discovered a category of crime that they called “objective.” A crime was “subjective” when you had done something wrong; it was “objective” when, through no deed of your own, you belonged to a social class that the government wanted to liquidate. As early as 1918, Latvian Latsis, one of the chiefs of the Cheka, the precursor of the KGB, announced the goal in plain language: “We are engaged in annihilating the bourgeoisie as a class.” Thus there was no need, Latsis explained, to “prove that this or that man acted against the interests of Soviet power.” It was enough to ask, “To what class does he belong, where does he come from, what kind of education did he have, what is his occupation?” The answers to these questions “decide the fate of the accused.” “That,” he said, “is the quintessence of the Red Terror”—terror that was to cost the Soviet people an estimated 50 or 60 million lives in the coming half-century.

A third target of policies of extermination was cities and their populations. Let us consider two examples. The first is the bombing of Hamburg by the British air force in 1943. As early as July 1940, Churchill, while commanding the Battle of Britain, had called for “exterminating” air attacks on Germany. From then until 1942, the Bomber Command, afflicted by high loss rates and fearful of losing out in interservice rivalry with the Navy and the Army, drifted away from “precision” bombing, which had to be carried out in daylight, into “area bombing,” which could be carried out at night. The aim was to destroy the morale of the German people by killing German civilians and destroying their homes. By the end of 1942, giant raids on Lubeck and Cologne had made it clear that the annihilation of entire cities in one or a few raids was feasible. Accordingly, Most Secret Operation Order No. 173, of May 27, 1943, stated, under the heading “Intention,” that the aim of the raid was “to destroy HAMBURG.” The order estimated that 10,000 tons of

bombs would have to be dropped to “complete the process of elimination.” And thus it was done, producing a firestorm in the city and killing some 45,000 people in a single night.

The second example is Hitler’s plan, formed even before his attack on Russia, in June of 1941, for the annihilation of Moscow and Leningrad. Moscow was to be razed because it was “the center of [Bolshevik] doctrine”—for Hitler’s larger goal was an “ethnic catastrophe.” He intended to dig a reservoir where Moscow had once been. At first, he planned to spare Leningrad, because it was “incomparably more beautiful” than Moscow; but soon he put Leningrad, too, on the list of cities to be destroyed. His explanation sheds light on the mentality of those who are preparing to exterminate entire human communities:

I suppose that some people are clutching their heads with both hands to find an answer to the question, “How can the Fuhrer destroy a city like St. Petersburg?”. . . I would prefer not to see anyone suffer, not to do harm to anyone. But when I realize the species is in danger, then in my case sentiment gives way to the coldest reason.

The Nazi general Franz Halder concurred with this supposedly cold reasoning: annihilating the two cities, he wrote, would be a “national catastrophe which [would] deprive not only Bolshevism but also Muscovite nationalism of their centers.”

A plan was drawn up. Leningrad would be sealed off, to weaken it “by terror and growing starvation”; then the Germans would “remove the survivors in captivity in the interior of Russia, level Leningrad to the ground with high explosives, and leave the area to the north of the Neva to the Finns.”

Of course, we know that the two cities survived, owing not to any thaw in Hitler’s cold reasoning but to the almost superhuman resistance mounted by the Russian people.

## **EXTERMINATION AS A SYSTEMIC EVIL**

**J**ust as the twentieth century’s policies of extermination—whether of peoples, classes, or cities—enveloped entire human communities, so also they were carried out by entire communities—or, at any rate, by the state authorities that putatively, represented those communities. Extermination, a species of crime requiring extensive social resources, is—can only be—a systemic evil. To the extent that popular support was present, the policies amounted to, attempted murders of one society by another. Although there can be debate over just how extensive popular support was for Stalin’s and Hitler’s policies of extermination, there can be no doubt that, through the states that ruled over these peoples, the resources of entire societies were placed at the disposal of those carrying out the policies.

Those resources were not just the obvious ones—the secret police, the transportation systems, the concentration-camp administrations, the armies, the bomber forces. They had to include mass cooperation of the kind that control of the state alone provides. When the state becomes an exterminator, and the law, instead of enjoining evil, supports and enforces it—as does the whole tremendous weight of custom, habit, bureaucratic inertia, and social pressure—the individual who might seek to oppose the policies is left in an extremity of moral solitude. Even the voice of conscience, in these circumstances, can become an enlistee in the ranks of the evildoers.

People find themselves in the dilemma defined by Mark Twain when he presented Huck Finn's inner deliberations whether to turn in his friend the runaway black slave, Jim. Huck's "conscience," he believes, is telling him that it is wrong not to turn Jim in. Nevertheless, Huck decides to do what is "wrong" and hides Jim. Adolf Eichmann, too, heard the voice of an inverted conscience, but he, unlike Huck, obeyed it. At the end of the war, with the defeat of Germany in sight, he had an opportunity to slow down or even halt the transports of the Jews to the killing centers, but instead he redoubled his efforts. "The, sad and very uncomfortable truth," Arendt writes, "probably was that it was not his fanaticism but his very conscience that prompted Eichmann to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war. . . ." For "he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do—to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care."

## **EXTERMINATION AS PSEUDOSCIENCE**

**A**s if to Leave individual judgment in even greater perplexity, science—or to be precise, pseudoscience (otherwise known as ideology)—was summoned to lend its pseudoauthority to the policies of extermination. In the late nineteenth century, in a wholesale resort to the persuasive power of sheer metaphor, social Darwinists had taught that nations in history, like species in evolution, were subject to the law of survival of the fittest. As early as 1848, Friedrich Engels had distinguished between "historical nations" (they included Germany, England, and France), which were destined to flourish, and "ahistorical nations" (they included most of the Balkan peoples), which were destined for history's scrap heap. His interest in these ideas is one illustration of the intellectual roots that the Marxist theory of classes shared with racial theories of evolution. In Stalin's Russia, classes—some, doomed, some destined to rule—played the role that races played in Hitler's Germany.

Hitler's Final Solution of the Jewish "problem" was in his mind only one part of a vast scheme of ethnic expulsion, resettlement, extermination, and racial engineering, in which he planned to eradicate Poland and Ukraine, among other nations. For example, of forty-five million inhabitants in Western Russia, according to a memo prepared by the Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories, thirty-one million were to be expatriated or killed. "Drop a few bombs on their cities, and the job will be done," Hitler suggested.

The extent to which Hitler, caught up in the grandiose theories of racial pseudoscience, had transcended mere nationalism is shown by his often-stated readiness to sacrifice even the German people if they showed themselves cowardly or weak. No nationalist could have said, as, Hitler did in 1941, when still at the height of his power, that if the Germans were "no longer so strong and ready for sacrifice that they will stake their own blood on their existence, they deserve to be annihilated by another, stronger power." In that event, he added, "I would not shed a tear for the German people." He made good his promise when, facing defeat in 1945, he ordered the destruction of the entire infrastructure of German society, including its industry, buildings, and food stocks. But then had he not warned the world, as if in fulfillment of Conrad's vision of Kurtz devouring all the earth with all its mankind, that "we may perish, perhaps. But we shall take the world with us. *Muspili*, universal conflagration"? Hitler's willingness to accept—and even to

carry out—the destruction of Germany (and the whole world into the bargain) was an early warning of the ease, later illustrated on a much greater scale in the nuclear policy of “mutual assured destruction” during the Cold War, with which those who adopt policies of annihilation can overshoot the mark and wind up involving themselves in suicidal plans. Unfortunately, once the scruples that inhibit the extermination of millions of “others” have been discarded, there are very few left with which to protect “ourselves.”

## **EXTERMINATION AS RADICAL EVIL**

**T**he new policies—of which the extermination of human populations was the objective, states or whole societies were the authors, the instruments of modern science were the means, and for which the concepts of pseudoscience were the rationalization—prompted new thinking about the nature of evil. They precipitated what might be called a crisis in the meaning of evil, by which I mean a crisis in all of the human capacities whereby, once evils have occurred, the world tries, as best it can, to respond to them—to incorporate them into memory and the historical record, to understand them, to take appropriate action against their recurrence. The crimes of the twentieth century seemed to make a mockery of these powers. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt, making use of a phrase of Immanuel Kant’s, named the new phenomenon “radical evil.” According to Kant, ordinary evil occurred when the will, driven by some fear or lured by some temptation away from the principals of equity and justice, committed a selfish act. Radical evil occurred when the will, even when unafraid or unswayed by temptation, somehow inspired itself to commit evil. Whereas ordinary evil, being dependent on the happenstance of external threats or temptations, was by its nature occasional, radical evil, being ever-present in the will, might infect any or all of a person’s actions. If we extend this idea from the individual to the state, we arrive at the distinction between a state that commits a crime in violation of its own good laws and a state whose laws ordain and enforce evil. Obviously, the latter is more dangerous, for it has corrupted one of the main defenses we sometimes have against evil—the state and its laws. This nullification of the human power of response brings a new feeling of bafflement and helplessness. For outbreaks of radical evil, Arendt explained, do not only destroy their victims, often in stupefying numbers, but “dispossess *us* of all power” (italics mine), for they “transcend the realm of human affairs,” and “we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses.”

The problem for the most elementary of responses, memory—a problem deliberately created by totalitarian regimes, which have sought to erase their crimes from the historical record—was simply to rescue the facts from their intended oblivion. Against these efforts were eventually pitted heroic acts of witness—by an Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Nadezhda Mandelstam, a Primo Levi. The problem for feeling was the exhaustion that empathy must encounter in the face of suffering on such a scale. And the problem for thought was *nothingness*—the sheer absence created by the extinction of communities. The problem for law, in addition to the corruption of the perpetrators’ own laws, was the likely destruction of the victims’ legal system, if one ever existed. What remained were third parties who might seek to judge the wrongdoers by newly created laws, as was done in the Nuremberg trials. (This problem was solved after the fact for the Jews by the foundation of the state of Israel, which put Eichmann on trial.)

The twentieth century's policies of extermination were radical in one more sense. "Radical" evil, as the Latin origins of the word suggest, is evil that goes to the root. The root, though, of what? The answer must be: that which extermination afflicts and destroys; namely, life. The root of life, the spring from which life arises—as distinct from life itself—is birth, which is the power that enables communities composed of mortal beings to regenerate and preserve themselves in history. And it is this power, precisely, that acts of extermination annul.

After witnessing the trial of Eichmann, a "papier mache Mephistopheles" if there ever was one, Arendt backed away from the phrase "radical evil." "Only the good has depth and can be radical," she wrote in a letter to her friend Gershom Scholem. Evil, she now believed, "is never 'radical,' only extreme." It was this very shallowness, she concluded, that produced the frustration of the mind faced with the new crimes. "It is 'thought-defying,' she explained, "because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing." (This relationship between evil and nothingness, though it has been most clearly manifested in history only in this century, was signposted in Christian theology, in which, as St. Augustine maintains, being, taken as a whole, is good, and its absence is called evil.)

In truth, though; "there is nothing" in two senses where radical evil is concerned. First, there is nothing (perhaps just "a little loose dirt") in the souls of bureaucrats such as Eichmann, for when the state of which they are a part goes berserk, they can, merely by thoughtlessly doing their jobs (quitting would take some imagination), participate in gargantuan evils. Second, as Arendt had pointed out earlier, the erasure of a community from the face of the earth leaves a kind of "nothing" behind; namely, the "hole of oblivion" in the human order where that community had once existed. Perhaps banal evildoers, as Conrad knew, are capable of committing evil that is radical (or "extreme," if you prefer), as if the emptiness of their minds and souls prefigures the emptiness in the world that they and the policies they serve leave behind. What is "thought-defying" after the fact is, appropriately, done thoughtlessly to begin with.

## **THE SECOND AUGUST: NUCLEAR EXTERMINATION**

**I**n her reflections on radical evil, Arendt was addressing policies of extermination that had been adopted before the advent of nuclear weapons, but it is plain that what she had to say applies in almost every particular to nuclear policies and nuclear danger. In other words, although Hiroshima came as a great surprise and shock to the world, it did not arrive without a historical context and historical precedents. On the contrary, it was the supreme expression of forces that had been developing ever since Conrad had Kurtz write, "Exterminate all the brutes." Behind Hiroshima stood not only the obvious precedent of area bombing but all of the twentieth century's policies of extermination. These amounted, by the end of the Second World War, to what might be called a legacy of extermination, and in August of 45 the United States fell heir to it. The hallmarks of the legacy were all present. The nuclear threat was a threat of extermination—extermination, this time, not only of nations and peoples but of the human species. The root of life that now would be severed would be the root of all human life, birth itself, and would shut all future human beings out of existence. The evil was a systemic evil: The system posing the threat, once the "balance of terror" was established, went beyond any single state to incorporate the

greatest powers of the world, which, in the system of mutual assured destruction, became jointly complicit in the project. The threat was supported by pseudoscience, spun this time from game theory and other forms of futurology manufactured in think tanks and academic institutions that subserved power. Nuclear “strategy”—regarded by many as a contradiction in terms—became the very epicenter of banality. Nuclear arms increased the capacity of human beings to destroy one another to its absolute limit, beyond which any further improvements would merely be “overkill.” The arsenals threatened radical evil, in the fullest and most exact sense of that term: they brought radical evil to perfection. The powers of human response to evil would be entirely destroyed by the evil deed itself. Policies of extermination again spilled over into suicidal policies. The “coldest reason” again was invoked to rationalize genocide. The conscience of the individual was again thrown into crisis by the policies of the state.

The deeds in question again were, as Arendt had said, “thought-defying.” The “nothingness” that now awaited was absolute, the crisis of meaning full-blown. The atomic bomb that burst over Hiroshima burned for a moment as bright as the sun, but at its heart was a darkness that was eternal. The twentieth century had, so to speak, arrived at the heart of the heart of darkness.

The advent of the nuclear age, however, brought with it another major change in ‘the development of the century’s policies of extermination. At a stroke, it removed them from their totalitarian residence and planted them at the core of liberal civilization, which is to say at the core of the national security policy of the powerful democratic nation about to assume leadership of the non-Communist world—the United States. The new location brought with it a new moral and practical riddle of the first order. Instruments of the most radical evil imaginable—the extinction of the human species—had appeared, but they were first placed in the hands of a liberal republic. The fact that, more or less by an accident of history, the bomb was born in New Mexico, U.S.A., in 1945, rather than, say, Heidelberg, Germany, in 1944 (no sheer impossibility of science or history rules out our imagining the latter possibility), lent it a triple warrant of virtue that it otherwise would have lacked.

In the first place, the bomb gained luster from its new residence. Without becoming jingoistic about the United States or overlooking the dark passages in its history, including slavery and the near-extinction of Native Americans, it must be said that the United States was no Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. History had in a sense played a trick on the world, as it so often does. If history had been logical, it would have given the bomb to Hitler, whose policies (including his suicidal inclinations) so clearly pointed in the direction of extermination on the new scale. It’s easy to imagine what civilized people would have said if Hitler had been the first to use nuclear weapons—perhaps against Moscow or London. They very likely would have said that nuclear war was a natural culmination of *Vernichtungskrieg* and an ideology that sanctioned the extermination of peoples, and that with nuclear weapons Hitler was enabled to do quickly and efficiently what he had already been doing slowly and clumsily with gas chambers. The United States, on the other hand, had shown no recent inclination for policies of extermination, as was demonstrated shortly by its mild, liberal, extremely successful occupation policies in Germany and Japan. In the second place, the bomb arrived just in time to hurry along the end of the most destructive war in history. It made its appearance as a war-ending, war-winning device. The totalitarian and the liberal regimes had arrived at their policies of extermination along very different historical paths. Whereas Hitler and Stalin destroyed peoples, classes, and cities for reasons that even today defy rational explanation, the United States destroyed Hiroshima and

Nagasaki for the perfectly clear and, comprehensible purposes of ending the war quickly and getting the upper hand over the Soviet Union in the embryonic Cold War. (To point this out is not to justify these acts; it is only to observe that the goals of policy were conventional and rational.) In the third place, the almost immediate outbreak of the Cold War, with the totalitarian Soviet Union created a justification for continuing to build nuclear arsenals, lending the bomb still another warrant of virtue. It assumed the role of guardian of the free world.

To this triple validation of policies of nuclear extermination, accorded by the accident of timing and place, a fourth, of later origin, must be added. Although it was true that with the growth of the arsenals the depth and range of terror were soon increased to their earthly maximum, it also happened that none was ever used after Nagasaki. Instead, they were held suspended, like the sword of Damocles cited by President John Kennedy, over a completely jeopardized yet undevastated world. It was as if, in the nuclear arsenals of the Cold War, the destruction and mass killing of the entire first half of the twentieth century had been distilled into a poison of fantastic potency but then this poison, instead of being administered to a doomed world, had been held in reserve, being employed only to produce terror. To the question whether Western Civilization had put behind it the legacy of extermination that it had been developing for half a century, the nuclear policymakers of the, Cold War in effect gave an equivocal answer. Their answer was, No, for we have plans for extermination that beggar Hitler's and Stalin's, but our sincere wish is never to be provoked into actually committing the deed. Certainly, the legacy of extermination had not been renounced. Rather, it had been hugely developed and assigned a more important role in world affairs than ever before. Now the world's greatest power as well as its adversary relied upon it for basic security. On the other hand, the very fearsomeness of the new threat was invoked to prevent its being carried out. And not only did the bomb prevent its own nuclear war, the theorists said; it prevented the worst of the conventional wars: no conventional third world war broke out. In the meantime, however, an estimated 40 million people, most of them civilians, were killed in local wars—a fact suggesting that major war was as much displaced as deterred.

Whether a third world war was headed off because of nuclear deterrence or for some other reason is a question not easily resolved. It is a historical fact, however, that in the minds of most policymakers as well as millions of citizens nuclear deterrence worked. The bomb, already seen as a war-winner and a freedom-defender, now was granted the additional title of peacemaker. (The MX missile was given this very name, and the Strategic Air Command adopted the motto "Peace Is Our Profession.") Here was a bargain with the devil to make Faust green with envy. Victory, freedom, peace: was there anything else for which the world might petition an openhanded Lucifer?

And yet none of these benefits altered in the slightest particular the irreducible facts of what nuclear weapons were, what they could do, and what they were meant to do "if deterrence failed." One bomb of the appropriate megatonnage would still obliterate any city; ten bombs, ten cities. Hitler had killed an estimated 6 million Jews; Stalin had sent an estimated 20 million of his fellow Soviet citizens to their deaths. A few dozen well-placed nuclear bombs could outdo these totals by an order of magnitude. But at the height of the Cold War, there were not a few dozen nuclear bombs; there were almost 70,000, with thousands poised on hair-trigger alert. A policy of extermination did not cease being that because the goals it supported were laudable. Described soberly and without the slightest hyperbole, it was a policy of retaliatory genocide.

For most people most of the time, these perils remained all but unimaginable. But every now and then the reality of the policy was borne in on someone. That happened, for instance, to Robert McNamara shortly after he became secretary of defense in 1961, when, he received a briefing on the Single Integrated Operational Plan at the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command. In the event of a Soviet conventional attack on Europe—or merely the plausible likelihood of such an attack—the United States’ Plan 1-A, which was its only true option for major nuclear war, McNamara learned, was to annihilate every Communist country from Poland to China. There was no operational means, he further learned, by which, if the president desired, he could spare one or more of these countries. Albania, then engaged in bitter polemics with Moscow, was to be obliterated merely because a Soviet radar facility was stationed on its soil. The plan was for obligatory multiple acts of genocide. In *The Wizards of Armageddon*, Fred Kaplan reports that “McNamara was horrified.” He set about trying to create other options. Today McNamara favors the abolition of nuclear weapons because, in his carefully chosen words, they threaten “the destruction of nations.”

Hiroshima, in sum, had created a gulf between ends and means. Never had evil been more radical; never had the good that was hoped from it been greater. The means were an evil that exceeded the capacity of the human being to imagine them; the ends were all the splendors of liberal civilization and peace.

**T**hus, through the invention, production and deployment of nuclear arsenals, was the tradition of extermination glimpsed in prospect by Conrad in colonized Africa, pioneered and developed under totalitarian government and in total war, conjoined to the liberal tradition that had been knocked off course at the beginning of the real twentieth century by the First World War. In a political as well as a moral sense, however, the union was tentative. During the Cold War years, the Western nuclear powers (the United States, England, and France) did indeed learn the art of *Living with Nuclear Weapons*, in the title of the Harvard-sponsored book of 1983, but they had not taken the marriage vows. Reliance on nuclear arms was widely considered an extraordinary, provisional response to an extraordinary, provisional emergency: the threat, as many people in the West believed, to the freedom of the entire world by the Soviet Union, which, of course, soon developed nuclear arsenals of its own.

The Soviet threat shaped the West’s embrace of nuclear terror in two fundamental ways. First, it was placed in the moral scales opposite the nuclear threat, rendering the latter acceptable. The mere physical existence of humankind, many people believed, was worth risking for the sake of its moral and spiritual existence, represented by the survival of freedom. Second, most people were persuaded that the secretive nature of the Soviet regime ruled out effective inspection of radical nuclear-arms-control agreements, thus making full nuclear disarmament impossible. In 1946, when the United States put forward the Baruch Plan, which proposed the abolition of nuclear arms, the Soviet Union, now working at full tilt to develop its own bomb, turned it down. Historians still argue whether it was reasonable for the United States, already in possession of the bomb, to expect the Soviet Union, which did not yet possess the bomb, to close down its nuclear program as part of a global agreement to abolish nuclear weapons. However that may be, there is no doubt that the Soviet rejection of the Baruch Plan played an important role in the United States’ understanding of its own moral and historical responsibility for the nuclear arms race that followed. The United States, Americans believed from 1946 on, had proved itself ready to

eliminate nuclear weapons, but the Soviet Union stood in the way. The Soviet threat, in American eyes, thus both justified nuclear arms and placed an insuperable practical obstacle in the way of their abolition. As long as this appeared to be the case, the United States could regard itself as a reluctant threatener of nuclear destruction, merely forced into this unwelcome role by the character of the regimes it felt obliged to oppose.

### **THE FUTURE OF EXTERMINATION: THE THIRD AND THE FOURTH AUGUSTS**

**T**he third of our Augusts, in which the failed coup in Moscow brought on the collapse of the Soviet Union, dissolved this equation. The age of totalitarianism, which had opened in October of 1917, was over. The balancing factor in the moral equation that for almost fifty years had justified nuclear arsenals had fallen away. Would total war survive the loss of its linguistic and historical brother? Could the one exist without the good of the other? Should nuclear weapons survive the end of the “short twentieth century,” not to speak of the “end of history”? And if they did, had the century (the “real” one) or history really “ended”? This question, which has hung over the decade between the end of the proposed short twentieth century and its calendrical end, has acquired even greater urgency as we move into the next century and millennium.

At the beginning of this essay, I recalled the old Greek idea that because the end of a story can force us to rewrite its earlier chapters, we cannot know what the story is until it is over. No single narrative can or should attempt to encompass the history of an epoch, which contains a limitless variety of entwined tales; yet, as the concept of a real twentieth century suggests, the very choice of the dates that mark off one era from another means that certain stories lay special claim to our attention. It’s already clear that it will be impossible to write the political history of the twentieth century without reference to the many-chaptered story of the century’s policies of extermination, some of whose main chapter headings will surely be the three Augusts we have mentioned. The final shape of that story, however, will not be known until the arrival of that future date—some future August day, perhaps—on which the ultimate fortunes of the arms that were born in 1945 are decided. Interpretations of the real twentieth century now require not so much smarter interpreters as the world’s decision whether, in the wake of the Cold War, it will reject nuclear weapons or once again embrace them.

Let us, then, perform a thought experiment in which we try to imagine how the twentieth century will appear in retrospect, in light of two possible next chapters of the nuclear story. In the first, we will imagine that the next chapter is the last—that the world decides to eliminate nuclear weapons. In the second, we will imagine that the Cold War legacy of nuclear arms has been accepted and has led to their proliferation. Our glance, in the two cases, is not chiefly forward, the world that lies ahead, but backward upon the century that has just ended.

In the event that abolition is embraced, we will find, I suggest, that what the American government said and the American public believed from 1946, when the Soviet Union rejected the Baruch Plan, until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, was essentially true: that the policymakers were as dismayed by nuclear danger as ordinary people were; that in their minds the reason for enduring the risk of human extinction really had been the threat to freedom around the world posed by the Soviet Union; that the government would indeed have preferred to abolish nuclear weapons in 1946 but had been prevented by the Soviet Union; and that this was truly why,

when the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States seized the opportunity to lead the world to nuclear abolition. We will, further, take seriously the often-repeated argument that “arms control was an invaluable temporary holding action for reducing nuclear danger until political conditions were ripe for full nuclear disarmament. We will take even more seriously the arguments of those who held that it was not nuclear arms that fueled the political differences of the Cold War but the political differences of the Cold War that fueled the nuclear-arms race, and who therefore argued against arms control. And then we will show how, precisely because the anti-Communism of the time had been authentic, Communism’s end naturally opened the way to abolition of the arms that had protected us against Communism. We will be unsurprised to record that many of the Cold War’s fiercest hawks had become abolitionists And we will note with satisfaction how the example of these former hawks was emulated by hawks in other nations, including India, Pakistan, and Israel, who therefore agreed to relinquish their countries’ nuclear weapons as part of the general settlement.

Even the evolution of high nuclear strategy, historians may go on to relate, will then seem to have been a slow education in the realities of the nuclear age, especially after the shock of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which left such a deep impression of the horror of nuclear war in the minds of later abolitionists, such as Robert McNamara. It will be the gratifying task of analysts to record how, even on the political right, the most militant believers in armed force slowly came around to an understanding that, in the words of Ronald Reagan, the most conservative president of the era, “nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought,” and they will trace the path from that understanding to his discussion of nuclear abolition at the Reykjavik summit meeting of 1986 with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Paralleling this slow evolution in thought, we will see, was the equally slow development in practice of the so-called tradition of nonuse, which gradually taught statesmen that even when they possessed a nuclear monopoly they could extract no military or political benefit from it and so did not use nuclear weapons after Nagasaki. In this story, acts of nuclear restraint—by the United States in Vietnam, by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, by China in its border war with Vietnam in 1979—will have the place that battles have in bloodier narratives. The Cold War thus will be partially redeemed in our eyes as a vast laboratory in which, at the price of a few hair-raising close calls, the world learned through patient reflection and oblique experience that nuclear weapons were as futile as they were abhorrent and that they could and should be eliminated.

The lessons will go deeper still. When the last nuclear plutonium pit has been liquidated (or, more likely, adulterated and buried away in some deep cavern), we will see that the ground for nuclear disarmament had been prepared, on the one hand, by the peace movement in the United States, and, on the other, by the movement against Soviet power by dissidents in the Soviet empire (two movements that at the time failed, on the whole, to grasp the common drift of their activity). The astounding success of the resistance movement in the East will emerge as the first stage in a global movement against not only Soviet terror but all terror—against not only totalitarianism but its close relative, total war—whose last stage will be the elimination of nuclear arms, thereby truly ending the spiral of violence that began in 1914.

The rise and fall of totalitarianism from start to finish will wear an altered aspect. It will turn out to have been a ghastly, protracted detour from the progress (the word itself might even gain new credit) and enlightenment offered by liberal civilization, which, although capsized in 1914 by the First World War, will have righted itself in 1991, bringing on an era of prosperity and peace. Then liberal civilization itself, freed of its complicity in the policies of extermination it

adopted in 1945, will rest at last on a sure foundation. The political history of the twentieth century will thus be the story not only of the rise of policies of extermination in all their variety but also of the human recoil against them, leading, first, to the renewed rejection of totalitarianism and embrace of democracy in the 1990s and then, in the years following, to the abolition of nuclear weapons along with other weapons of mass destruction.

In the second thought experiment—in which we suppose that the nuclear powers have renewed their embrace of their nuclear arsenals in the post-Cold War period, setting the example for several other powers, and so installing nuclear weapons as a deep—and many-rooted structural feature of life in the twenty-first century—the political and military history of the twentieth century will have to be written very differently. To begin with, we will not be able to take so seriously the West's stated justifications for building nuclear arsenals. How will we continue to believe that the democratic nations endured the risk of human annihilation for the sake of human freedom when, with the threat to freedom gone, the threat of annihilation is preserved? How will we continue to say that the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union was the great obstacle to full disarmament when, with the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia (under Gorbachev) inviting full inspection and proposing full disarmament, the United States refused? Having discovered that the end of Communism left our will to possess nuclear arms intact, the old claim that in the Cold War we chose to risk being “dead” rather than going “Red” will ring hollow. The entire fifty-year confrontation between totalitarianism and democracy will shrink in importance as an explanatory factor. Our attention will be drawn instead to the ease with which the United States shifted its nuclear planning in 1945 from Germany to Japan, and then from Japan to the Soviet Union, and we will see this flexibility as a precedent for the much more drastic and shocking shift of targeting at the end of the Cold War from the Soviet Union to . . . well, what? A few feeble “rogue” states, the mere possibility that Russia will again become an enemy of the United States?

We'll hardly be surprised to see that several nations outside the original nuclear “club” have followed the “nuclear paradigm.” As for arms control, it will be understood as just one of the means by which public anxiety about the nuclear danger was put to sleep. Our policy of non-proliferation will seem to have been half-hearted, since it will have been shown that we preferred to permit the whole world to acquire nuclear arms than to give up our own.

The process of education that occurred during the Cold War will seem to be the opposite of what it would have seemed had we abolished nuclear weapons: one not of deepening understanding of the horror and futility of the arsenals but of simply getting used to them in preparation for accepting them fully and without reservation as a normal instrument of national policy, of learning to “stop worrying and love the bomb,” in the words of the subtitle to the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, which will have lost their ironic connotations.

A graver suspicion will be confirmed: that the United States and its nuclear allies did not build nuclear weapons chiefly in order to face extraordinary danger, whether from Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union, but for more deep-seated, unarticulated reasons growing out of its own, freely chosen conceptions of national security. Nuclear arsenals will seem to have been less a response to any particular external threat; totalitarian or otherwise, than an intrinsic element of the dominant liberal civilization itself—an evil that first grew and still grows from within that civilization rather than being imposed from without. And then we will have to remember that the seminal event of the real twentieth century, the First World War, sprang in all its pointless slaughter and destructive fury from the midst of that same liberal civilization, and we will have to

ask what it is in the makeup of liberalism that pushes it again and again, even at the moment of its greatest triumphs, into an abyss of its own making.

Our understanding of the historical place of totalitarianism will likewise change. Instead of seeming a protracted bloody hiatus between the eclipse of liberal civilization of 1914 and its restoration in 1991, totalitarianism will appear to have been a harsh and effective tutor to liberalism, which was its apt pupil. The degree of moral separation from the tradition of extermination that was maintained during the Cold War will have disappeared. If we look at nuclear arms as a lethal virus that spreads by contagion around the world, then totalitarianism in this picture of I events becomes a sort of filthy syringe with which the dominant liberal civilization managed to inject the illness into its bloodstream, where it remained even after, in 1991, the syringe was thrown away. Liberalism will itself have unequivocally embraced extermination.

**A**t stake is the very character of the victorious civilization that in the twentieth century buried its two greatest totalitarian antagonists and now bids to set the tone and direction of international life in the century ahead. Will it shake off the twentieth century's legacy of terror or, by embracing nuclear weapons even in the absence of totalitarian threat, incorporate that legacy into itself? Will we find that protecting civilization is unimaginable without threatening extermination? If so, a critical watershed will have been crossed, and we will have passed, by default, from a period in which an extraordinary justification, such as the Soviet threat, seemed needed to justify the extraordinary peril of nuclear arms to a period in which the quotidian fears, jealousies, ambitions, and hatreds that are always with us are found to be justification enough. At that moment, a nuclear arsenal will cease to be felt as Conrad's "dishonoring necessity" and become a fully legitimized voluntary component of the state: a permanent subbasement, or catacomb, on which the fairer upper floors of civilization—the freedom, the democracy, the prosperity—rest. But if this happens, can liberalism itself survive, or will it in the long run find itself sucked, as in 1914, into a vortex of destruction that it cannot stop?

Nuclear arsenals do not exist in isolation from the rest of politics, and no single policy, whether regarding these arms or anything else, can decide the character of the century that is about to begin. Nor will a decision to abolish nuclear weapons even put an end to the legacy of extermination that disfigured the century now ending. The deeds of Pol Pot in Cambodia and of the former Hutu government in Rwanda have made it clear that genocide remains attractive and achievable for many governments in many parts of the world. No nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction are needed to bring it off; Kalashnikovs, or even machetes or hoes, will do. What seems clear, however, is that if the triumphantly restored liberal order of the 1990s cannot renounce the threat of extermination of peoples as a condition for its own survival, then it will forfeit any chance that it can successfully oppose a resurgence of barbarism anywhere else in the twenty-first century. We will be unable to say that any year—whether 1991 or 2000 or 2050 has undone 1914 until we have also undone 1945. More than any other decision before us, this one will decide who we are, who we are to be, and who, when the last line of the story of the real twentieth century is truly written, we will have been.

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