

The Age of Extremes

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Hobsbawm coined the expression the long 19th century from 1789-1914¹ and devoted a trilogy to its elucidation². What would be more natural than think of the short 20th century to last between 1914 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991? Consequently Hobsbawm, probably as an afterthought, decided to add a kind of appendix to his trilogy, by adducing the present volume conceived in the same format.

For Hobsbawm it is natural to think of the short 20th century as the century of the Sovietunion and the concomitant experiment in Socialism providing a serious alternative to the capitalist system. Whether this is a parenthesis or not, as it certainly appears from the vantage point of the early 21st, is of course far too early to tell. The horrors of the Communist system, especially as they were practised under Stalin, have been amply documented, and Hobsbawm as a historian cannot ignore them; yet given his background and youthful enthusiasm for the Communist cause, which combining with his espousal of Marxism gave to his life as a historian respectively its moral inspiration and intellectual support, it is inevitable that he views it with a certain detachment. There is a very big difference between being a historian of the long gone past, and one of a period in which you have been an active observer yourself. In the latter case your own experiences and prejudices are bound to color the presentation significantly, which is both an advantage and disadvantage. The advantages of detachment and objectivity maybe about counteracted by the lack of direct experience. The past is naturally viewed by the advantage of hindsight, and the inevitable selection you have to make is bound to be guided by what had significant consequences for the future. This is after all what it entails to make out of the mass of historical fact a coherent story. But to the contemporaries of a period the future is denied and thus they may report on what was important at the time but which since has turned out to be irrelevant³. In particular, as Hobsbawm has noted, such awareness may protect the historian from the cardinal sin of anachronism. The simple fact that the future is essentially unpredictable is too often forgotten leading to various counterfactual speculations and highhanded opinions as to what should have been done. The rise of Nazism, to give an obvious example, may strike us as totally irrational in view of what it ultimately entailed, but for the actors at the time, the situation was rather different.

The essential fact, Hobsbawm reminds us, is that Soviet Russia under Stalin defeated Nazism (and thus saved the world). A feat Tsarist Russia would not have been capable of, and thus, for all the scruples you may entertain about the Russian Revolution, you

¹ Although I suspect that many people have played with the designation independantly of Hobsbawm. For my own part I conceived the same as a high-school student, but only as a fleeting thought.

² The Ages of Revolution, Capital and Empire respectively

³ At the end of the second millenium there was much publicised worry about the so called Millenium bug. Nothing came out of it, and how many remember it now a mere six years later?

should never forget this central fact around which the whole century evolves, and which certainly justifies whatever sufferings it may have caused. It certainly is true that the Russians suffered by far the greatest casualties, and while the Germans had, in the repeated words of Hobsbawm, overrun the western front with ridiculous ease; in the east they met their match and bled to death. But to make such a statement, weighty because it has tremendous consequences of moral justification, is to engage in counterfactual speculations. Such should be anathema to the serious historian because of its unverifiability and ultimate frivolousness. On the other hand, any policy maker need to consider alternate strategies and hence futures, just as we all do in our planning and decision makings; thus the activity is in some sense unavoidable, and even if it can never give definite answers, it can at least generate fruitful questions. So how should we try and rebut such a claim? For one thing we should note that the rise of Nazism can both be seen as inspired by as well as a reaction to the Russian Revolution, and the fear of the Bolsheviks certainly added to the electoral success of the Nazis. And it is well worth remarking, that although the regime enjoyed wide-spread popular support after its establishment, its electoral support prior to it, although admittedly strong, was never overwhelming. We are thus back to the butterfly effect, a few percentage less of votes, and the events may have tipped the other way and deflected what may never in retrospect have been appreciated as the unmitigated catastrophe as it turned out to be⁴ In short one may argue that without the rise of the Russian Revolution there would have been no Nazism, thus attacking a counter-factual statement with another one, most likely even less supportable. As to the fact that Stalinist Russia was particularly adepted to withstanding the German onslaught compared to Tsarist Russia, one may more confidently throw into doubt. The red army was in disarray as a result of Stalin having abolished the competent command, either as a result of extermination or repulsion. Admittedly the Soviet economy rallied and its command structure was particularly adepted to the urgent needs of war (as all command structures are, also in capitalist countries). Hobsbawm argues, at least implicitly, that the brutal industrialization by Stalin, never to have been implemented by a Tsarist regimes, gave the necessary muscle. This might conceivably be true, if inevitably once again of a counter-factual nature, but one should not forget some basic features having to do with the great geographical expanse of Russia and its superior manpower allowing it to rally; as well as the fact that the key to the German success had always been speed, and that it on the contrary lacked sustainable power. In the end it was simply ground down by the overwhelming advantage of resources available to its adversaries. It is noteworthy that made the Russians rally was not the defence of communism but national survival, as reflected in the designation of the Great Patriotic War⁵. One should of course not forget Napoleon,

⁴ In true counter-factual spirit, say that if Hitler had never been allowed to power, but some other set of characters would have made their mark on history instead. It might have led to some catastrophe, maybe not at all as great as the one that turned out to be, but of that we would have had no inkling. Later counter-factual historians in a counter-factual future, may well have argued for the case of Hitler as an alternative that would have avoided the catastrophe. Thus we should always be wary of commentators who make sweeping historical comparisons as basis for predictions.

⁵ And here the Germans played in their hands. Their abominable treatment of its conquered populations turned potential allies into the bitterest of enemies

very much in awareness at the time, who with superior forces but inadequate logistics was ground down by the combined forces of climate and distances, allowing a rambling and incompetent Russian army to deliver a *coup de grace*. Against this one may put the case of the victorious Wilhelmine army against the disarray of the Tsarist forces. But of course the war was never extended and the Bolsheviks themselves sued for peace.

Revolution in Russia was ripe, Hobsbawm writes, the Tsarist regime was on its last leg, and had already, as a consequence of the defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1905, suffered a serious attempt of revolution. Its overthrow was simply a foregone conclusion. Obviously the debacles of the First World War hastened such a development, but was it really inevitable? The Russian regime was, like that of the Ottoman, an anachronism, and during the previous century it had spawned a lot of terrorist activity and especially dreams thereof, of which the Russian Communist party was merely one of many groups⁶. An incontestable fact is that the Tsarist regime collapsed. Imploded so to speak, not because out of a concerted attack (still it was in dire straits as far as its military status was concerned) but because it had lost its nerve and sense of legitimacy and thus fell down by its own weight, not unlike the case of buildings set up for demolition, in which the force of gravity is made to do the major work, once some key structural bearings have been weakened. In fact one may find striking similarities between the demise of Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia. Hobsbawm argues convincingly that the Bolshevik assumption of power should not be seen as a *coup d'état*, after the collapse there was simply chaos, the provisional government had no control, and there was a free for all. Symptomatically Hobsbawm does not mention Kerensky and thus, probably justifiably so, treats him as a non-entity. The Bolsheviks were simply the most well-organized, motivated and some would say most ruthless force around. Lenin strikes a romantic figure, and Hobsbawm is far from immune to his charms. He waxes about his visions and intelligence and treats his ad hoc additions to Marxism with due respect. One thing is clear, Lenin certainly knew how to seize and consolidate power, but even after its seizure, the position of the Bolsheviks was weak. According to Hobsbawm the whole rationale for the seizure was to bring about a world revolution in which Russia would provide the spark, but where the main action would be in Germany and other major Capitalist countries. As we all know it came rather close to a revolution in Germany, and there was actually a shortlived Soviet regime in Hungary, both of which at the time may have been sensed by contemporaries as being far more significant than the Russian Revolution. But of those there came naught, while the Russian Revolution prevailed. Why is that? In retrospect it is tempting to speak about its destiny (as Hobsbawm unwittingly does when referring to Stalin's victory over Hitler as treated above). A more mundane explanation may simply be that Russia was isolated and chaotic, allowing what would otherwise have been nipped in the bud to survive. The civil war that ensued certainly strengthened the regime, true to the dictum of Nietzsche, that what does not kill me makes me stronger⁷.

After the Civil War with power consolidated the Bolshevik regime faced a dilemma,

⁶ The Dostoevsky novel - the Possessed addresses this, as well as his early biography

⁷ The Civil War between the Reds and the Whites spilled over the traditional Russian borders involving also Finland, in which the whites prevailed. It has been interestingly suggested that if the whites had won all over, Finland as an independent nation would not have survived

how to proceed? World Revolution was no longer the top agenda, and in retrospect it certainly looks as if that moment had come and gone. Under Stalin this aspect was played down and never revived subsequently. The Bolsheviks were good on rhetorics and theory, but as to the practical management of a country they were at a loss. Thus, if I understand Hobsbawm right, the New Economic Policy launched by Lenin was not to be seen as a tactical and temporary concession to capitalism but something to fill a void. Bukharin urged a kind of gradual adjustment between socialism and capitalism, while Stalin, who eventually got his way, advocated a command economy with five year plans.

If three names should be mentioned as setting their indelible marks on the century, they are Hitler, Stalin and Mao. There is a perverse competition among their adversaries which were responsible for most deaths. This is a rather pointless competition, as for all three the sky was the limit and their ultimate achievements were limited by being thwarted rather than out of constraint⁸. All three were clearly psycho-paths, if that notion carry any meaning at all, and the question as who was the most insane is academic. My hunch is that Hitler might have been the most human of them all as to his psychological make-up. This is indeed a disturbing thought and meant to be one, and in what sense should it be made? I suspect that would the reader meet the three without any prejudices, he or she would find Hitler the most accessible and charming⁹. After all, unlike Stalin and Mao, Hitler had to earn his position by appealing to the electorate as well as manœuvre politically, mainting loyalty as much by charm as by fear¹⁰. Stalin started out his career as a hitman, for which Hitler certainly would have been to squeamish. But the whole point is that the personalities of those characters are ultimately irrelevant. It is too easy and too unfruitful to relegate all responsibility onto their shoulders. For that they are just too narrow.

Hobsbawm applauds Stalins brutal industrialization as a triumph of mind over matter, but concedes that his agricultural initiatives were not as succesful. Indeed they were catastrophic and resulted in the starvation of millions. Hobsbawm points out rightly that there is no inherent advantage of small-holders private farming as opposed to collective enterprises (although in the case of the Sovietunion the small private plots did indeed provide a disproportionate contribution to the total agricultural production) rather to the contrary as exemplified by the rationalization of modern agriculture. So collectivization as such is not enough to explain the debacle¹¹. As to the terror of Stalin, one thinks of the thirties and the political and cultural elite with its showtrials and deportations. As far as number of victims are concerned, those are clearly marginal, as usual there are the unsung victimes who provide the numbers. As noted above Hobsbawm treats such matters lightly

⁸ As I have remarked before, had Hitler not been checked, the death-rolls would have been even more awesome

⁹ Hitler had in fact many of the attributes, like a love of dogs, which many people unreflectively take as proof of humanity

¹⁰ Although one should not underestimate the charm generated by power alone independant of personal contribution

¹¹ Certain historians claim that the famines were not the result of incompetence but wilfully induced. For the sake of proper perspective one should not forget the famines in Bengal, claiming millions of victims, just before the independance. Famines which have been attributed to the indifference of the British.

as if not of his concern.

Fascism is a term bandied about, but few care to make precise what it really means and signifies, beyond a designation of the politically odious¹². In modern books purporting to elucidate the concept a list of common features are presented with the understanding that political movements fulfilling most of those criteria should deserve to be labeled fascists; a method not unlike those employed in psychological literature to designate say psychopaths or borderline schizophrenics. Indeed fascism is considered as a kind of political insanity. The historical origin of it is Italian, with the word 'faschia' referring to a sheaf, and the notion that single we can be broken, but united we are strong. Thus in effect nothing but the call for collective effort. As such it appeals to the little man and his hopes of power and dignity through becoming part of something larger. It fits beautifully into general movements of socialism and workers unions, and as such it was applauded by many progressives in the twenties¹³. But how does it differ from the progressive left? This depends on your position. If you are a Marxist you may note the lack of any coherent ideology and reveal it as a secret front for capitalist forces and attack it with vehemence¹⁴. If you are a liberal democrat you may focus on its lack of democracy, i.e. rule of law, freedom of speech, parliamentary representation, and take special exception to its criminal excesses, like assassinations of political rivals, tortures, persecution of minorities, and if you are of an intellectual bent, its conservative views on art and restricted sense of science. All of those being features that may or may not be present¹⁵. Hobsbawm not unsurprisingly classifies Italian fascism and Nazism as fascism, but not Francos regime (although he is not consistent and reverts once or twice to the term as general abuse when referring to the former Spanish regime). It is not entirely clear on what he bases the distinction on, especially as he classifies Portugal under Salazar to have been fascist. Franco did not come to power through a popular movement but through military imposition, thus his creed being conservative and authoritarian drawing on traditional Catholicism, rather than populist. Furthermore Franco was satisfied with keeping a rigid control of Spain and harboured no plans of conquests (as to dreams and phantasies thereof we may as usual never know). But if so, in what way did Portugal differ? Through its desperate hold onto its colonies? Mussolini and Hitler are always paired, and for good reasons, after all they were comrade in arms. Mussolini was originally an inspiration to Hitler, and the latter became an object of emulation for the former. Both movements arouse out of the same populist tradition, still the internal differences may after all be larger than the similarities. Italian fascism lacked the particular element that made Nazism so odious, namely anti-semitism. Furthermore it was probably not an ideologically committed anti-racist movement, although its colonial

¹² Orwell complained about this in his writings, noting that the term had degenerated to general political abuse against anything one did not like

¹³ as well as earning the approval of Churchill as Hobsbawm chasteningly remarks

¹⁴ It is typical behaviour among sects to attack those closest to you with particular virulence out of sibling rivalry and to maintain exclusive access to a particular niche. To Hobsbawms youthful dismay the Communists during the Weimar republic concentrated their hostility to the Social Democrats, not the Nazis

¹⁵ With those criteria Soviet Communism certainly would qualify, although it is not conventional to do so, fascism obviously involving more than just refusing to play by democratic rules

practices told otherwise, on the other hand its attitude to natives were shared with most western colonial powers. If allowed to have developed in isolation, i.e. if history had been allowed to take another course, its reputation might have been very different. Its excesses, like colonial adventurism and its part in the axis, may be mainly attributed to the personal vanity of Mussolini. Thus while the German nation is inextricably linked with to Nazism, the Italian is exculpated as a victim of the former.

Hobsbawm divides the short century into three part, the first of which contains all the drama of its course, and designated as the period of catastrophe, encompasses the period between 1914-1945, the thirty-one year war. The second world war is naturally seen as a continuation of the first, with the interwar years seen as an uneasy truce witnessing the near collapse of capitalism and its consequences - the growth of fascist movements. The crash on Wall Street 1929 was indeed a momentous event with world wide repercussions, although the Soviet economy seemed immune. It greatly undermined the faith in Capitalism as an economic system, and where it did not engender fascist reactions it made the moderate left come to the fore, leading to the breakthrough of Keynesian economics and the active intervention of the State. On the other hand one should not exaggerate the crisis, after all it did not threaten the majority of people, and the cyclical nature of capitalism, with its booms and slumps, had been empirically observed. But to what extent was it responsible for the rise of Hitler and hence the second world war?

The first world war was an unprecedented catastrophe. It was war on a scale never seen before, and certainly not envisioned nor planned. It caused a tremendous loss of young men in combat¹⁶, but being of a civilized nature, it caused few civilian losses¹⁷, although that does not mean that the civilian populations did not suffer serious privations¹⁸. The losses were of such a volume as to cause noticeable demographic consequences especially in France. It led to a punitive peace and the setting up for the second act, which would turn out to be far more brutal, causing atrocities compared with which most recent one pales. It ended with the total defeat of Germany and the first atom bomb, whose mushroom cloud would cast its shadow on the rest of the short century. I have above touched upon the role of communism in the rise of Nazism, other traditional causes being the desperation of economic disaster and the humiliation of Versailles. Certainly the latter played a major role in a substantial part of the population. In fact it has often been taken as an indication that the explanation is to be found deeply embedded in the history of the German people and in their national character (whatever that means) formed by as well as forming that very history. Few people look for explanations in say the crushing of the Sepoy mutiny in India, or the ruthless colonial exploitation in the Belgian Congo.

In retrospect impending war seems obvious as the thirties marched to its end; yet War was the last thing the Western powers wanted to think about, in fact the lesson of the First World War, if any, was the abolition of war, one of its obvious consequences being a

¹⁶ Hobsbawm estimates that the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 might have caused 150'000 casualties, compared to the millions suffered by the world war

¹⁷ most I guess from the German submarines. Incidentally none of the wartime sinking of commercial ships have engendered the same impact as that of the Titanic, a pre-war muddle. Death in war is seldom glorious, pace conventional rhetorical excesses

¹⁸ mostly as a result of the allied blockade of Germany

lack of rearmament. This put those powers in a quandary, the only comfortable solution of which was to stick your head into the sand. Hence the policy of appeasement and the infamy of Munich, in the future to be seen as an argument for preemption. What sealed the outbreak of the Second World War was the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. It came as a bolt from a clear sky, and shocked leftists all over the western world, leading to a widespread rejection of communism. But not by Hobsbawm. His interpretation is simple and has the ring of conviction. The normal course of action to be taken by the French and the British would have been to have joined forces with Stalin, presenting a common front. This clearly should have stopped Hitler (as it eventually would do). The reluctance of the Western powers to take this step forced Stalin to make a deal with his arch-enemy in order not to have to face him alone. If Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union initially, would the western powers have come to its rescue? It is quite reasonable to suppose not. Thus Stalin was simply gaining time in order to survive. Thus the ultimate responsibility is shifted from Stalin to the passivity of the west hampered by its ideology of anti-Communism. As Hobsbawm points out one of the truly historical events of the short Twentieth century was the alliance of Communism and Capitalism in defeating their common enemy and thus saving the world as we know it. This is undeniable. And had this alliance been formed a few years earlier we may very well have been spared the catastrophe of the war that followed (although of course by the logic of counter-factual speculation, we would but faintly have been aware of what we would have missed, it being by itself just a speculation). There is but a few weaknesses in this chain of argument. An alliance in War is something quite different from an alliance in Peace. Stalin did not choose to go to war with Hitler (at least not when it happened, as to his future plans we will never have any firm idea) he was attacked. Both the West and the East found themselves attacked by a common enemy. The inexorable logic of such a predicament easily transcends considerations of mere political ideology. When the war was over, and in fact even as it was not yet over, the alliance predictably crumbled¹⁹.

The central fact of the twentieth century is in my opinion the Atom Bomb²⁰. It had the effect of freezing history, making the later parts of our history so fundamentally unlike the first, that the former seems to belong to an entirely different age and century. The Nuclear card made war no longer an option, although it did not entirely stop actions exploiting that impossibility - so called brinkmanship. Of course it did not stop wars altogether, but it stopped the ultimate confrontation, put a lid on how far things were allowed to go. Wars in the past were limited, at least by technology and often by notions

¹⁹ The case of Finland is a clear illustration of the old principle that the enemy of your enemy is your friend, however distasteful. Finland was a victim of forces beyond its control, the logic of its situation made it end up in the wrong camp. To the historically innocent, the Finns joined the ranks of the German underlings, eager to share in the spoils. In all honesty, there is some truth in this accusation, and as victims the Finns survived relatively unscathed their involvement. Hobsbawm notes with some satisfaction their initial spirited defence against Stalin, and speculates that the reason Stalin did not try to impose a subservient government as in the rest of Eastern Europe was the fear of a repetition.

²⁰ As a child and adolescent I feared that I would never be allowed to reach adulthood. On the other hand the abstract nature of the threat made it blend with more normal fears of hell and damnation, and thus had more of a metaphorical effect than anything else

of chivalry. With the First phase of the World War the possibility of a limitless war begun, in the Second this was actively pursued²¹. With the advent of the Third it was about to be realized, thus threatening to truly end all wars. Communism and Capitalism were forced, not into an alliance, but into, to use the words of a contemporary player, a peaceful co-existence. Not co-operation but more or less friendly competition.

The Soviet Union earned a lot of prestige by its victory. A prestige that was mainly converted into fear. Hobsbawm notes that the fear of communist sympathy in the west forced the hands of its governments to create the modern well-fare state. This is yet another one of those unprovable facts and rather than dwelling on it I prefer to state the obvious one that the thirty years or so of the postwar period witnessed an unprecedented prosperity in the west. The Second World War had been an unmitigated disaster, yet societies rose out of its ashes with almost alarming alacrity, such a contrast to the case of the First World War. Why is that? Hobsbawm hints at the blessings of a Keynesian economy, with governments committed to a mixed economy interfering benignly through the huge transfers of a well-fare society. This may quite well be part of the explanation, but hardly the whole of it, and detractors (to which we will return later) would rather speak about the well-fare state being a result of the prosperity, not a cause of it.

Times of crises and trauma make very good history and are exciting to read and study; peace and prosperity on the other hand make dull stories. But to paraphrase Simone Weil, when it comes to living through them, it is the other way around²². At the end of it there was the youth revolt of 1968. Hobsbawm is fascinated by it, although very much detached. Indeed, and here I unreservedly agree with him, the gap between the generations straddling the war was greater than anything that had ever occurred before. For us growing up in the fifties and sixties, the period of our parents as children seemed extremely distant²³, as noted above, it appeared to have taken place in another era²⁴. Thus to Hobsbawm the revolts of the 60's lacked the seriousness that characterized his times of growing up, and he classifies its purported revolution not as political but cultural. The postwar generation was pampered, and what they ultimately revolted against were the last constraints imposed upon them. The Marxist coloring of their ideologies was nothing but fashion, old-fashioned anarchism would have suited the tempers of the time far better. And indeed the radicalism of that time, with its romantic espousal of faraway revolutions and progressive issues, did in the end fade away, and many of its most vocal

²¹ It is an apparent irony of history that the ban on chemical warfare was respected in the second. The prosaic explanation is that more promising technologies were developed.

²² It is a well-known consolation, that misfortunes in travel make up great stories to tell in the future. An observation, whose explicit formulation (in addition to application) goes back at least to Homer.

²³ I recall my father remarking that the differences between their parents and themselves were far less than those between us and them. My father was ostensibly talking about material conditions and I sensed a resentment not to say accusation. In fact we were repeatedly told by our elders how lucky we were, but as far as I was concerned, I had never asked for those material benefits, but looked nostalgically back onto a period that struck me as idyllic (no doubt my imagination having been stimulated by the prevalent childrens literature at the time) devoid of the threat of nuclear annihilation among other things.

²⁴ And indeed the 20's, 30's and 40's seem individually to stand out more than any other decades of the century

enthusiasts found comfortable accommodations with the establishment whose opposition they had initially made into a career. Although not restrained to the States, it was no doubt spawned by it. The Civil Rights Movement and the opposition to the Vietnam War²⁵ being fairies at its birth. It is well worth remarking that the major politicians of the early postwar period (up to the early 70's) were born in the 19th century and had lived through the Hobsbawms period of catastrophe as adults. It was ostensibly against their ossification our generation rose, which now enjoys the political power as the short century has passed and the third Millennium has dawned. When comparing our generation to that of our grandparents I am once again struck by the difference in experience and am reminded of Solshenitsyns early indictment that the young of 1968 had no experience but that of the sexual.

The last decades of the century were again decades of crisis according to Hobsbawm, although it is not clear in what material sense²⁶. Capitalism both losing its confidence and being revived by free-market orthodoxy. Hobsbawm looks with disgust upon its modern economic proponents, ridiculing them as high-priests of a faith not tolerating any dissent. Although I am in sympathy with his sentiments I cannot help to find them ironic coming from an old Marxist. And the Soviet Union collapsed, and with it an empire (whether evil or not) and an experiment. Until the sixties, although the Soviet system was viewed with disgust as oppressive by its vocal adversaries, there was also respect verging on fear of its economical viability. Chrustjov used to brag about the imminent overtaking of the capitalist economies, and those predictions were taken very seriously²⁷. After all had not the Russians proved themselves in the vanguard when space exploration was concerned, conceived of as the cutting edge of technology if any during the fifties; and as to military might they certainly were second to none. The fear of so called gaps (to be counteracted during diminishing windows of opportunity) characterized much of American policy. It was also seen as an expanding country (after all had not the history of Russia for the last centuries been one of unchecked expansion?) which had to be contained²⁸. Cold War strategy developed not into a case of chess, but rather as a game of Go, where undisputed territories were left alone and cautious moves were restricted to their margins. As noted above Stalin early on played down the international aspect of Communism. In fact, as Hobsbawm likes to point out, Stalin was cautious where he had no control, on the other hand ruthless when it was within reach. And when Soviet foreign policy is looked at with detachment, its lack of adventurism is indeed striking. Still for small countries living by a giant neighbour, there is always a sense of precariousness, independent of ideologies. So the basic question is whether the failed experiment of the Soviet Union, and a failure it was as seen by the readiness of communist parties all over the west to drop the very name on which their distinction was based, shows once and for all that

²⁵ which for most boiled down to an opposition against personal conscription

²⁶ The oil-crisis nevertheless remained more of a reminder than a privation, and as to personal fortunes, the rapid oscillations of the same hide the greater swells of economic cycles

²⁷ I recall that what shocked me the most during my visit to Moscow in 1968 was the poverty, which I presumably had never expected.

²⁸ In the notorious terminology of the American diplomat George Kennan; whose caution and good sense nevertheless seems to have had some indirect beneficial influence on American policy.

a Socialist economy is doomed, intrinsically inferior to a free-market one. Hobsbawm contends that things are not so easy, the Soviet Union just being one of many possible experiments in non-capitalist economy (although it seems at the moment unlikely that other experiments will be launched). Hobsbawm takes exception to the linkage between a free-market economy and a liberal democracy, so cherished by fashionable economists, implying both that a command economy is incompatible with democratic institutions and that a market economy not only encourages but forces political democracy, citing the case of Chile (and with less enthusiasm China) as counterexamples. But one striking if not always properly appreciated effect of the isolation the Soviet experiment entailed, is the conservative²⁹. Many features of the old age, not least the cultural, survived. To some extent that goes for large stretches of nature, in spite of the indifference the communist economy showed towards environmental concerns³⁰, as well as old (dilapidated) buildings and obsolete economical traditions. To those observers of a conservative temperament, regardless of political inclination, the passing of the old Soviet system, no matter how fervently once desired, is a source of bitter-sweet nostalgia, no doubt shared by a large component of its actual population.

The Soviet Union, we recall, imploded, collapsing under its own weight, as a building doomed to demolition, by the undermining of its own strategic structures. The man who oversaw it all, ironically with the ambition of its reconstruction, was Gorbachov. For all his local failures, his main achievement overrides them all, of more or less singlehandedly, deflecting the spiraling of mutual paranoia, whose ultimate end we all dreaded. To do so took great powers of persuasion to break through the thick wall of suspicion, because after all by the relentless logic of paranoia, any act of good-faith is to be feared as a particular insidious ruse. So if there is a worthy person to oppose the tyrannical troika referred to above, his is an obvious candidate, save that for all his achievement he is by now, a mere decade later, as good as forgotten, and thrown onto the refuse heap of history, while those who gloried in atrocity will live on, if in infamy. But in the long run this is as good as fame, the verdict of history never being just.

But what did really happen in the short century? Only the dramatic events make it on the daily news, much of them so much sound and fury, in the end signifying nothing. Maybe the greatest event after all was the migration from country into city seriously starting after the war, transforming the traditional lives of billions fundamentally. Still in the great reservoirs of manpower - China and India, the rural populations still make up a majority, but for how long? The 19th century was the century of progress, devoted to the idea of it both being good and inevitable. But that progress touched but a very few, unlike the kind of progress that is now in motion. It clearly has the mark of inevitability, but is it good?

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²⁹ One may argue that the very isolation of the Soviet Union preserved it, and that it would have disintegrated much earlier, had it been more involved in the global economy

³⁰ The disappearance of the Lake Aral being a striking case in point