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The Enlightenment Roots of World War I and its Legacy

1. Introduction

World War I was among the first of the major disasters that would happen throughout the 20th century. Many complicated factors added up to the event that triggered the War, and many more complicated legacies have been left behind by it. This essay will by no means cover everything (that would most likely take several lifetimes’ worth of research), but will seek to give a very brief overview of the cultural climate before and after the so-called “War to End All Wars.”

1. Pre-World War I

For much of European history, the center of unity across national boundaries was the Christian faith. Events like the Great Schism and the Protestant Reformation did impair this unity, but people on all sides of both divides still maintained Christian unity among themselves and, in a very limited way, with those on the opposite sides of the splits. The Enlightenment, however, minimized the centrality of Christ as the unifying force throughout Christendom. In the place of the Logos, the Enlightenment introduced Nationalism to serve that role on a much smaller scale, only uniting peoples with a common genetic, geographical, and/or historical connection together.

Nationalism created many tensions throughout Europe, especially as subjugated people groups (such as the Yugoslavians and the Irish) began to gain a sense of wanting to rise out of their predicament and establish independence (CollegeSideKick, “The Coming of War”). Needless to say, imperial powers such as the British and the Austria-Hungarians were not exactly pleased with this development. This time bomb was set off by one Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist who assassinated Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914. The assassination sparked the Great War, and the effects of that war reverberate in the modern day.

During the Enlightenment, many thinkers also posited that man could outgrow his animalistic and barbaric ways of the past, and become a perfectly rational being. Francis Bacon, for example, wrote in his Novum Organum (published in The Portable Enlightenment Reader, edited by Kramnick, pp. 39-42., cited in Dyer, 2019) that one of his goals was to tear down the “idols” of various public spheres, that is to say, subject everything both in nature and in human behavior to Rationalism. Later philosophers, however, saw a level of absurdity in such a proposition. Dostoyevsky wrote in Notes From the Underground (published in Basic Writings of Existentialism, edited by Gordon Marino, pp. 213-14, cited in Dyer, 2019) that no matter how much man’s behavior is analyzed and subjected to educational reforms, the scientific processes behind his animalistic behavior remain, and boredom in an otherwise perfected world is all that is needed to return him to his barbaric tendencies. And, ironically, instead of perfecting man, subjecting his behavior to Materialist categorization simply gives a deterministic sanction to his immorality. If everything is just the result of innumerable sequences of cause and effect, then man has no free will, and cannot be held responsible for anything he does.

In World War I, the two threads of Nationalism and the death of metaphysical moral principles blended to produce the bloodiest war fought by humanity up to that point. With most questions about morality set aside, technology was employed to as full an extent as both sides were able to in order to come out victorious.

1. The Legacy of the War to End All Wars

According to BBC Newsround (2018), the massive technological shift induced by the War covered many things: it revolutionized aerial transportation due to the need to develop durable planes fast, for example. The invention of the machine gun, with its ability to mow down lines of soldiers, necessitated the development of trench warfare tactics. Tanks were used in combat for the first time in history, and U-Boats were developed to detect submarines. Medical technology was also subject to change: blood donation was established as a practice, and the Thomas Splint was invented for soldiers with broken legs, reversing the rate of survival from 1/5 to 4/5.

Due to most of the fit military-age men being shipped off to the war, women were required to join the workforce to fill the economic gap. This would help jumpstart the feminist movement, establishing a precedent for women’s equality in employment and political involvement. Albeit, this equality would not be fully realized until after World War II, but a seed was planted here.

1. Conclusion

The circumstances surrounding World War I were highly intricate and complex, far beyond the scope that can be covered in a finals essay. But the fruits of the Enlightenment never fell far from the tree, and it can be seen how the predictions of such people as Dostoyevsky came true. The War also produced many changes in the West, which have since snowballed and have left a drastic mark on how society functions. “War never changes,” but it does change those who participate in it.

On Liberal Authoritarian Paradigms

1. Introduction

Two of the most prominent ideologies to arise in the 20th century were Fascism and Communism. These two Authoritarian political frameworks shaped the history of Europe, and affect political discussions in the modern day (usually used as derogatory terms). This essay will give a brief overview of their definitions, why they gained such a foothold on Europe, and the world they left in their wake.

1. Definitions

In modern discourse, the names of these two ideologies are often invoked purely as a label of disapproval, obscuring what their actual values are and ultimately obstructing communication across boundaries of political belief. Thus, for the sake of this essay, definitions will be provided, based on articles from the *Encyclopedia Britannica.*

Fascism is a difficult belief system to nail down, since it was expressed in many different ways by many different political parties, and various scholars emphasize different aspects of its history, theory, and application (Soucy, 1999). However, a common thread can be found among the diverse groups to which the label is applied: for example, there generally was a strong hatred for Classical liberalism and most ideas that stemmed from it, including Parliamentarian Democracy, and religious/cultural/ethnic pluralism, opting instead for Totalitarianism and overall uniformity. Ironically, there was always a pervasive Nationalistic streak, which is a value stemming from Classical Liberalism. Though a few Fascist groups were Socialist-leaning, the economic structure often espoused was Corporatist, which organizes each economic sector into a political hierarchy with Parliamentarian elements so that the interests of the worker would (in theory) be represented to the government.

Communism is simpler to define, as there was less plurality in the theory itself among its thinkers and practitioners (though there was variation in opinions on how it should be governed, ranging from anarchism to authoritarianism), as well as being more an economic system rather than a complete political system itself (Ball and Dagger, 1999). It is founded on a few basic tenets: there should only be one societal class, the working class; each worker should give as he is able, and receive as he needs; and private property should be abolished.

1. Appeal, Implications, Consequences

Now, the question remains why such radical political frameworks became so popular, and even persist at a subdued level to the modern day. This author would posit that part of the appeal is simply the promise of greener grass and a “better society,” whatever that may mean. Fascism would appeal to people who dislike the results of liberalism but perhaps have absorbed some of its tenets subconsciously; it promises the traditional values of a strong hierarchy, cultural and religious uniformity, and the end of “degeneracy,” while also holding to a Nationalistic identity over a particularly religious one (although it is very easy to blend the two together, to the point that many may find it difficult to sort out what is proper to each). Unfortunately, not a small amount of deception was also at play, with, for example, Mussolini using a “return to normalcy” as a talking point during elections (Einaudi, pamphlet 18)

As for how that played out practically, it is notable that Fascist countries by and large existed during wartimes and usually ended up on the losing sides of various conflicts. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain how a nation of that disposition would fare in an extended time of peace. But, working with the events that did happen rather than conjecture, Fascism generally resulted in mass execution of dissidents, and mismanagement to the point of nearing economic collapse. The same was (and still is) seen in Communism. Authoritarian Nationalism/Secularism seems to have a way of doing that.

Communism has an appeal because of its promise for total proletariat equality and fair distribution of resources. It is a fact of life that when there a class differences, those higher up on the hierarchy tend to mistreat those less fortunate than them and hoard resources. Interestingly, Communism imitates a lot of the morals and ethical appeals of Christianity, such as kind treatment of the poor and not accruing excess wealth. On a practical level, however, Communism also resulted mostly in death (both from executions and starvation) and socio-economic collapse, on a far larger scale than any Fascist nation. Modern Communist nations such as China and North Korea also largely function by deception of the people, preventing them from knowing much of what happens beyond their borders.

1. Conclusion

Fascism and Communism were two of the most widespread phenomena to appear in Europe during the 20th century, and have largely left a legacy of destruction and desolation. The promises they made have rarely come to fruition, and by and large have operated by deceit and fear. Though they both cover broad categories of belief systems, their attempts at establishing a functional authoritarian society on liberal ideas near-universally fall flat. Today, they are largely given negative connotations, and cultural memory leads people all along the political spectrum to invocate their names when they see something they disapprove of. But such misapplication of their titles can only obscure further the actual flawed ideologies behind them, and leave people that much more vulnerable to repeating their mistakes.

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