WHAT GOVERNS HISTORY: MAN OR FATE?

BY

CLARK MASER

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I

On June 12, 1812, Napoleon's armies invaded Russia. In the months that followed hundreds of thousands of men died, cities were devastated, and villages and farms looted and burned.

Humans have always pondered the root causes of historical events. The Greeks believed that the course of history and the destiny of men were determined by an implacable Fate acting through the Gods assembled on Mount Olympus. The Iliad illustrates such a view. And Edith Hamilton, in her classic book The Greek Way, comments of Xerxes and his invasion of Greece:

"Xerxes was not eager for the enterprise, but in actual fact he was helpless. It was written in the decrees of Fate that he should undertake it. The power of Persians had grown too great, their self-confidence too assured. The Gods who hated beyond all else the arrogance of power had passed judgment upon them. The time had come when the great empire should be broken and humbled."

The question of how critical historical events come to pass is central to War and Peace. Leo Tolstoy observes that when "the forces of Western Europe crossed the Russian Frontier and war began, an event took place opposed to human reason and to human nature."

Tolstoy then asks: "What produced this extraordinary occurrence? What were its causes?"

Tolstoy's answer is as follows:

"Had Napoleon not taken offense at the demand that he should withdraw beyond the Vistula, and not ordered his troops to advance, there would have been no war; but had all his sergeants objected to serving a second term then also there could have been no war. Nor could there have been a war had there been no English intrigues and no Duke of Oldenburg, and had Alexander not felt insulted, and had there not been an autocratic government in Russia, or a Revolution in France and a subsequent dictatorship and Empire, or all the things that produced the French Revolution, and so on. Without each of these causes nothing could have happened. So all these causes —myriads of causes — coincided to bring it about. And so there was no one cause for that occurrence, but it had to occur because it had to. Millions of men, renouncing their human feelings and reason, had to go from west to east to slay their fellows, just as some centuries previously hordes of men had come from the east to the west, slaying their fellows."

"The actions of Napoleon and Alexander, on whose words the event seemed to hang, were as little voluntary as the actions of any soldier who was drawn into the campaign by lot or by conscription. This could not be otherwise, for in order that the will of Napoleon and Alexander should be carried out, the concurrence of innumerable circumstances was needed without any one of which the event could not have taken place. It was necessary that millions of men in whose hands lay the real power — the soldiers who fired, or transported provisions and guns — should consent to carry out the will of these weak individuals, and should have been induced to do so by an infinite number of diverse and complex causes."

" We are forced to fall back on fatalism as an explanation of irrational events (that is to say, events the reasonableness of which we do not understand). The more we try to explain such events in history reasonably, the more unreasonable and incomprehensible do they become to us."

Tolstoy goes on to observe that:

"The higher a man stands on the social ladder, the more people he is connected with and the more power he has over others, the more evident is the predestination and inevitability of his every action. "

" A king is history's slave. "

" History, that is, the unconscious, general, hive life of mankind, uses every moment of the life of kings as a tool for its own purposes. "

" Though Napoleon at that time, in 1812, was more convinced than ever that it depended on him to shed (or not to shed) the blood of his peoples - as Alexander expressed it in the last letter he wrote him - he had never been so much in the grip of inevitable laws, which compelled him, while thinking that he was acting on his own volition, to perform for the hive life - that is to say, for history - whatever had to be performed. "

" When an apple has ripened and falls, why does it fall? Because of its attraction to the earth, because its stalk withers, because it is dried by the sun, because it grows heavier, because the wind shakes it, or because the boy standing below wants to eat it? "

" Nothing is the cause. All this is only the coincidence of conditions in which all vital organic and elemental events occur. And the botanist who finds that the apple falls because the cellular tissue decays and so forth is equally right with the child who stands under the tree and says the apple

fell because he wanted to eat it and prayed for it. Equally right or wrong is he who says that Napoleon went to Moscow because he wanted to, and perished because Alexander desired his destruction, and he who says that an undermined hill weighing a million tons fell because the last navy struck it for the last time with his mattock. In historic events, the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connection with the event itself.

Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will is in an historical sense involuntary and is related to the whole course of history and predestined from eternity."

II

The answer given by Tolstoy forms the subject of the famous essay by Isaiah Berlin: The Hedgehog and the Fox.

Berlin states that "the great illusion which Tolstoy sets himself to expose [is] that individuals can, by use of their own resources, understand and control the course of events."

Berlin's response is that:

"Napoleon may not be a demigod, but neither is he a mere epiphenomenon of a process which would have occurred unaltered without him; the 'important people' are less important than they themselves or the more foolish historians may suppose, but neither are they shadows; individuals, besides their intimate inner lives, which alone seem real to Tolstoy, have social purposes, and some among them have strong wills too, and these sometimes transform the lives of communities. Tolstoy's notion of inexorable laws which work themselves out whatever

men may think or wish is itself an oppressive myth; laws are only statistical probabilities, at any rate in the social sciences, not hideous and inexorable 'forces.' To say that unless men make history they are themselves, particularly the 'great' among them, mere 'labels,' because history makes itself, and only the unconscious life of the social hive, the human anthill, has genuine significance or value and 'reality' — what is this but a wholly unhistorical and dogmatic ethical skepticism? Why should we accept it when empirical evidence points elsewhere?"

Berlin then discusses the view of both Tolstoy and Schopenhauer that free will is an illusion and that the belief in this illusion "is the central tragedy of human life; if only men would learn how little the cleverest and most gifted among them can control, how little they can know of all the multitude of factors the orderly movement of which is the history of the world; above all, what presumptuous nonsense it is to claim to perceive an order merely on the strength of believing desperately that an order must exist, when all one actually perceives is meaningless chaos — a chaos of which the heightened form, the microcosm in which the disorder of human life is reflected in an intense degree, is war."

Symbolic of such heightened chaos and disorder of human life in war is Tolstoy's description of Prince Bagration, the Russian commander, and his staff at the battle of Austerlitz where, in the words of Berlin, no one "is, or can be, aware of what exactly is happening, nor where, nor why" but, nevertheless, the Prince's "courage, his calm, his mere presence create the illusion of which he is himself the first victim, namely, that what is happening is somehow connected with his skill, his plans, that it is his

authority that is in some way directing the course of the battle . . . although it is clear to everyone that he will have less to do with the conduct and outcome of the battle than the humble, unknown soldiers who do at least perform whatever actual fighting is done."

In the same vein is Tolstoy's picture of Pierre Bezukov wandering about "lost" on the battlefield of Borodino and, in Berlin's words, looking for something which he imagines as a kind of set piece; a battle as depicted by the historians or the painters but where he finds only the ordinary confusion of individual human beings haphazardly attending to this or that human want. Berlin observes that:

"Pierre is therefore closer to the truth about the course of events — at least as seen by men — than those who believe them to obey a discoverable set of laws or rules. Pierre sees only a succession of 'accidents' whose origins and consequences are, by and large, untraceable and unpredictable; only loosely strung groups of events forming an ever-varying pattern, following no discernible order. Any claim to perceive patterns susceptible to 'scientific' formulae must be mendacious."

Isaiah Berlin finds the same theme central to Stendhal's description of the battle of Waterloo in The Charterhouse of Parma where the protagonist Fabrizio wanders about the battlefield "understanding nothing," with Berlin pointing out the very considerable influence Stendhal had upon Tolstoy's writings.

III

Tolstoy's view that the individual and free will have no real control over the course of history, which is predestined and governed by inexorable laws, finds many echoes in Hegel's and Marx's theory of history. Both viewed history as an evolutionary dialectic process in which the contradictions arising within a given social system ultimately result in its collapse and replacement by a superior social system. However, Hegel and Marx had sharply different views as to the ultimate end of such process. Hegel believed that the inevitable result would be the establishment of a universal liberal society of liberty and equality while Marx was convinced that such a society would contain an inherent contradiction between the power of capitalism and the needs of the working class and, therefore, ultimately would be replaced by the victory of the proletariat and the emergence of a classless society.

As discussed by Isaiah Berlin in his book Karl Marx, the dialectic or historical materialism of Marx embraces the view that "human history is governed by laws which cannot be altered by the mere intervention of individuals actuated by this or that ideal."

As Berlin goes on to state, in Marx's view:

"The gradual freeing of mankind has pursued a definite, irreversible direction: every new epoch is inaugurated by the liberation of a hitherto oppressed class; nor can a class, once it has been destroyed, ever return. History does not move backwards, or in cyclical movements: all its conquests are final and irrevocable. Most previous ideal constitutions were worthless because they ignored actual laws of historical

development, and substituted in their place the subjective caprice or imagination of the thinker."

However, while Marx states that "history is determined - and the victory will, therefore, be won by the rising class whether any given individual wills it or not - "Marx at the same time concedes that "how rapidly this will occur, how efficiently, how far in accordance with the conscious popular will, depends on human initiative, on the degree of understanding of their task by the masses and the courage and efficiency of their leaders."

IV

A somewhat neglected writer who dealt with the novelist's treatment of history is Nicola Chiaromonte, an exile from Mussolini's Italy, whose book The Paradox of History was based upon a series of lectures he gave at Princeton.

The book discusses five "anti-historical" novelists and their view that "fate" governs the flow of history rather than the actions of individuals.

Novels and writers discussed are the previously mentioned The Charterhouse of Parma by Stendahl and the wandering of Fabrizio amidst the confusion of Waterloo; Tolstoy's War and Peace; Eté 1914 by Martin du Gard which dwells on the hidden irrational forces in society which brought on the First World War and the end of the liberal optimism as to the inevitable upward progression of mankind; Man's Fate by André Malraux whose heroes are fascinated by the contingency of history and the explosion of events and the clash of forces where everything depends on

chance; and Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago which proceeds from the conviction, like Tolstoy, that history as we actually experience it is not a rational concentration of events or the outcome of decisions in high places but a mass of infinitesimal accidents and unexpected incidents.

V

We are left with the question whether the individual can have any significant impact on the historical process.

As Isaiah Berlin said, "individuals . . . have social purposes, and some among them have strong wills too, and these sometime transform the lives of communities."

In a 1963 introduction to Berlin's Karl Marx, Robert Heilbroner doubts that history would have been significantly different if Marx had not lived. He says:

"It is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. To be sure, the trend of world capitalism would not have been deflected by so much as an inch if it had been deprived of the insights of Marx's masterwork, *Das Kapital.* Marxism as a system of thought has exerted virtually no direct influence on the internal economic evolution of American or European capitalism as such. But the influence of Marxism is not so easily summed up when we look at the revolutionary countries: Russia or China or Cuba or at the bubbling cauldron of the underdeveloped world. And its effect on these countries has, in turn, affected the West."

"A first glance would tell us that in these lands Marx was of the greatest importance. Whole political catechisms and, more than that, crucial political guidance have been wrested from the writings of Marx

and his collaborator Friedrich Engels, writings which have on many occasions assumed the role of Biblical literature in a fundamentalist community. Even so relatively liberated a Marxist as the Yugoslav spokesman Edvard Kardelj wrote a polemic against the Chinese position on the question of coexistence in 1960 by leaning not so much on facts and empirical evidence as on what Marx or Engels said. If Marx said (or if one can "interpret" Marx to have said) that coexistence was possible, then it is possible; if he said not, it is not.

Thus Marx and Marxism have indubitably left their imprint on the vocabulary, the thought patterns and the discourse of the revolutionary nations. Yet it is difficult to believe that the revolutions themselves would not have occurred or that Communism (by whatever name) would not be a great world presence today had Marx not lived. The forces which finally burst through the crusts of tired and corrupt societies in Russia, China and Cuba and which threaten to do so again in Latin American and Asia and Africa — may have been guided by Marxism, but they were not generated by Marxism alone. Had Marx never lived or written, old and incapable regimes would have given way to new and vigorous ones, no doubt with all the agonies by which such changes in history are usually accompanied. The world would have been different surely, but not perhaps all that different."

One can make the same observations about such critical historical events as the Napoleonic aftermath of the French Revolution and the rise of Hitler and Nazism following the defeat of Germany in the First World War.

The French Revolution unfolded in such a traumatic fashion and the hostile reaction of the European monarchies to same was so unrelenting

that it was inevitable, irrespective of the appearance of this or that personality, that the French would attempt to carry their revolution and its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity to the rest of Europe. What was not inevitable was the eventual placement of the attempt to expand the scope of the revolution in the hands of a man with limitless ambition and a consuming thirst for unchecked power.

Similarly, given the trauma and social dislocation resulting from the German defeat in World War I and the subsequent inflation and economic collapse experienced by the Weimar Republic, it was inevitable that the German people, irrespective of any particular leader, eventually would seek to overturn the results of the First World War and achieve the position of power which they enjoyed in 1914. What was not inevitable was the conferring of absolute power upon a man who used same with utter ruthlessness and who became intoxicated with success.

VI

Regardless of the amount of influence a particular individual can have upon the progression of history, it is essential that the so-called great man [or woman] endowed with leadership skills and "genius" for good or evil appear on the stage of history at a time when circumstances such as revolution, economic upheaval, military disaster, etc. permit the exercise of his or her talents.

The point is poignantly set forth in Stephen Vincent Benét's short story, The Curfew Tolls. The story concerns a British general who is staying on the French Riviera during the winter and spring of 1788-89. He meets a French major of the Royal Artillery, retired on half pay and

suffering from poor health. The French officer is quite short and walks up and down the promenade with a somewhat theatrical flourish. They gradually become friends and to the general's surprise the major displays an encyclopedic knowledge of military strategy and an overwhelming arrogance as to what he might have accomplished if the times had been right. One day the general visits the major's house and encounters his coquetish wife and quarreling collection of sisters and brothers.

The major's illness becomes increasingly severe and the general pays him a final visit and at the major's request reads him some of the verses of Thomas Gray:

"He listened attentively, and when I came to the passage, "Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed," and its successor, "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest," he asked me to repeat them. When I had done so, he said, "Yes, yes. That is true, very true. I did not think so in boyhood — I thought genius must force its own way. But your poet is right about it."

I found this painful, for I had hoped that his illness had brought him to a juster, if less arrogant, estimate of his own abilities.

"Come major," I said soothingly, "we cannot all be great men, you know. And you have no need to repine. After all, as you say, you have risen in the world —."

"Risen?" he said, and his eyes flashed. "Risen?" Oh, God, that I should die along with my one companion, an Englishman with a soul of suet! Fool, if I had had Alexander's chance, I would have bettered Alexander. And it will come, too, that is the worst of it. Already Europe is shaking with a new birth. If I had been born under the Sun-King, I would be a Marshal of France; if I had been born twenty years ago, I would mold a

new Europe with my fists in the next half-dozen years. Why did they put my soul in my body at this infernal time? Do you not understand, imbecile? Is there no one who understands?"

I called Madame at this, as he was obviously delirious, and, after some trouble, we got him quieted."

A few days later the major died and the general comments:

"I was watching at one side of the bed and a thunderstorm was raging at the time. No doubt, to his expiring consciousness, the cracks of thunder sounded like artillery, for, while we were waiting for the death-struggle, he suddenly raised himself in the bed and listened intently. His eyes glowed, a beatific expression passed over his features. 'The army! Head of the army!' he whispered ecstatically, and, when we caught him, he was lifeless . . . I must say that, while it may not be very Christian, I am glad that death brought him what life could not, and that, in the very article of it, he saw himself at the head of victorious troops . . . the face, after death, was composed, with a certain majesty, even . . . one could see that he might have been handsome as a youth . . . ."

Shortly thereafter the British general departs for home commenting that " . . . there was a tragedy about him beyond his station, and that verse of Gray's rings in my head. I wish I could forget the expression on his face when he spoke of it. Suppose a genius born in circumstances that made the development of that genius impossible - well, all this is the merest moonshine."

Before leaving the general is asked by the widow to assist with the wording on the tombstone. It reads:

Here lies

NAPOLEONE BUONAPARTE

Major of the Royal Artillery

of France

Born August 15th, 1737

at Ajaccio, Corsica.

Died May 5th, 1789

at St. Philippe-des-Bains

"Rest, perturbed spirit . . . "