

## The Evolution of A Breach of Faith

2479 Words

Some years ago, in one of my undergraduate history courses, the professor asked the class to define the seminal events of the period from A.D.1900 to the present. After the usual responses such as the Great Depression, the Rise of Nazism, The Second World War and the Atomic Bomb; he stated that while they were certainly formative in greater or lesser degree, it was his contention that three occurrences were the dominant and controlling influences on the evolution of human events in the Twentieth Century: the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and its concomitant Russian Civil War. After decades of observing, reading, and questioning; I have concluded that in the main, his thesis was valid. There is, however, one more element that works in tandem with the other three to explain the paradigm shift of American Society in the latter decades of the 20th Century: the advent of broadcast media in the 1920's. It is my belief that these four events were the final arbiters of the choices and options which created the history of the last century. Allow me to explain.

To begin with, the Industrial Revolution triggered marked changes that were not confined to the socio-economic arena: the Crimean War in 1853 was the first war to extensively harness industrialization to the means of waging war. It was, however, the First World War that extended the capacities of industrialized slaughter to new and previously inconceivable limits. World War I ushered in the concept of *Toten-Kampf* (Total War) involving not just heads of state and armies

on the field of battle, but the expansion of military targets to include industrial capacity, civilian morale, and international commerce. This war occasioned the first unrestricted use of U-boats to destroy merchant shipping without warning from beneath the sea (leaving the crews to drown). It beheld the enforcement of a blockade which resulted in famine and starvation in both Britain and Germany. It witnessed the use of sabotage to destroy civilian factories in both combatant and neutral countries in an attempt to reduce the availability of military material to their enemies.<sup>1</sup> And it saw the use of artillery against cities without regard to military necessities.<sup>2</sup>

Hailed as a war to end all wars, the First World War did nothing of the sort. Indeed, it inaugurated a new global Hundred Years War with so called “brushfire” or “proxy” wars occurring in every decade from 1920 to 2020.<sup>3</sup> Additionally it set the stage for the most destructive world war in human history. It led to a smoldering civil war in the most populous nation on Earth resulting in two armed camps: Nationalist Chinese supported by the United States and Communist Chinese supported by the Soviet Union. And it led to the ascension of an island nation in the Pacific to maritime world power status (which destabilized the Western Pacific).<sup>4</sup> Finally, it ended with the disintegration of three European Empires (which destabilized South Asia and the Balkan Peninsula).<sup>5</sup>

The most striking phenomenon of World War I, in my opinion, was the disparagement of the concept of the sanctity of human life. True, war has always involved killing of military personnel, but as the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906 attest to; prior to 1914 even war had rules and limits--civilians (non-combatants, the elderly, woman, and children) were considered protected. The Great War witnessed the transgression of all humanitarian boundaries. For the first time on a national scale, the lives of enemy combatants and non-combatants were accorded

no value beyond merely that of state assets; cogs in the enemy's war machine. This war saw the first use of poison gas to kill enemy soldiers in trenches like so many insects in an anthill. It was this war which saw a senior General initiate a battle not for strategic terrain or transport objectives, not to hinder or deny the enemy the means to fight; but merely to kill as many soldiers as possible in an effort to deplete the enemy of manpower, "to bleed the enemy white" in an abattoir of industrialized butchery.<sup>6</sup> It was in this war that the terror bombing of cities and population centers without regard to the loss of life among women, children, and the elderly became an accepted military measure designed to demoralize the civilian populations of the belligerents. And it set in motion the events which led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, the formation of the ineffective Kerensky government; and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in St. Petersburg.

With the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 (by the Russian Calendar), the Kerensky government was toppled and eventually, a civil war ensued. With the Russian Civil War another milestone in the degradation of the sanctity of human life was passed with the onset of the *Red Terror*. Unlike other episodes of terrorism (to include the French Revolution), the four year long wave of government sanctioned repression, torture, and indiscriminate murder carried out by the CHEKA (a forerunner of the KGB) reached new heights of inhumanity which extended throughout the length and breadth of Russian Society.<sup>7</sup> Women, children, elders--none were exempt. Even religious leaders became targets. Priests, monks and nuns were crucified, thrown into cauldrons of boiling tar, scalped, strangled, given Communion with melted lead and drowned in holes in the ice.<sup>8</sup> Sources estimate the total number of people indiscriminately killed as a result of the *Red Terror* at over a million human beings.<sup>9, 10</sup> Indeed, this is given credence by

the definition of *Red Terror* articulated at the time by the Chief of the Ukrainian Cheka, M. Latsis:

“Do not look in the file of incriminating evidence to see whether or not the accused rose up against the Soviets with arms or words. Ask him instead to which class he belongs, what is his background, his education, his profession. These are the questions that will determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning and essence of the Red Terror.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus with the First World War and the Russian Civil War, the wind had been sown. And in October 1920, with little fanfare a radio entertainment broadcast at Union College, Schenectady, New York, initiated a chain of events which led to the reaping of the whirlwind.<sup>12</sup>

In America, development of the broadcast media inundated the people in a culture of immediacy which had hitherto not existed. While it is true that hyperbole and exaggeration were present in the print media, what was written remained on paper; available for scrutiny and factual comparison. Thus, a certain standard of thought and critical judgement went into what was written since it could be kept and contrasted with reality. In the new medium of radio, however, this did not hold. Once the words were spoken they were dispersed over the airways, allowing for manipulation, distortion, egregious claims of being taken out of context, and outright falsehoods. As a consequence, the language was gradually debased over time. Words no longer had concrete, precise meanings and writers in the broadcast media came to be called wordsmiths; implying they could pound, hammer, and fabricate words to support any agenda they wanted because the definitions were malleable. But words are the vocal means of expressing ideas and concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, humane and inhumane. If words no longer have

immutable definitions, then it is inevitable that the thoughts and ideas which language expresses will also have no immutable constants. And in the end relativism becomes the only standard--if it makes one feel good it is good, if it makes one feel bad it is evil. With such a mushy seabed, it is not difficult to see how a society can drift without a moral anchor. History teaches us that any society that acquiesces in the slipshod use of words creates a situation where there are no concrete ethical constructs, since all judgements become relative in such an environment. When that occurs there is no fixed standard of moral behavior, only flexible standards which can be espoused using flexible words with fabricated meanings. A natural corollary of this is that all religious philosophy and teachings must be denigrated and renounced; for by definition they imply an immutable moral and ethical standard handed down by a Supreme Being (which is in direct contravention of the concept of secular relativism).

As the broadcast media learned of the vast potential for money-making which could be realized by condoning distortions, exaggerated promises, and outright falsehoods in commercials, the public was presented with a deluge of such advertisements. The predictable result was that over time, they became inured to this; tolerating the empty rhetoric and lies as merely Madison Avenue hype to be tolerated in exchange for the gratification of entertainment. When politicians observed this behavior they quickly realized that while Pavlov's dogs had been conditioned to respond to dinner bells; a significant portion of the world's population could be conditioned to tolerate lies and distortions as the price of political gratification (whether government give-aways or merely being commended and encouraged to feel good about themselves for "doing good", most often with other peoples' resources). The end result was that

exaggerated promises, distortions, and outright lies evolved politically from behaviors deserving of contempt to matters of common usage (not even worthy of mention, much less censure).

With the advent of the new medium, television, the situation markedly worsened. Now the smoke and mirrors of carefully crafted visual imagery were added to painstakingly selected words to weave a cocoon of self-delusion around a large part of the TV audience. Image supplanted substance. Emotionalism subjugated reason as the basis of decision making. Large segments of the populace, particularly in Western Europe and America utterly discounted wisdom, practicality or the effort required to accomplish something as issues to be evaluated when forming conclusions. Instead, they made decisions based merely on whether it made them feel good for a time or not; in both public and private life. And the broadcast media (taking a page from Ancient Rome) abetted the process by actively shielding the public from the dangers of the world with mindless drivel such as game shows and soap operas, gleaning huge profits in the process.

To claim that the medium was too new for anyone to understand what was happening is a blatant falsehood. The pernicious impact of broadcast media had not gone totally unnoticed. In 1958 Edward R. Murrow issued a warning regarding television's bias toward commercialism and entertainment at the expense of public service. He warned in a speech that television:

“...in the main insulates us from the realities of the world in which we live. If this state of affairs continues, we may alter an advertising slogan to read ‘Look Now...Pay Later’”.<sup>13</sup>

He was of course ignored. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan warned the public that the medium was insinuating itself into the message to such an extent that the way the medium portrayed the

message was at least as important and perhaps even more so, than the message itself with regard to how the public perceived it.<sup>14</sup> He too, was ignored. A few people here and there knew the piper might one day have to be paid...a few educators, a few ministers, a rare politician. But none of us reaching maturity in the seventh and eighth decades of the century realized our sweat, tears, and blood would be the currency required to discharge the debt.

Perhaps in future decades, with full access to the archives of the Federal Government (and the archives of both its adversaries and allies) someone will be able to explain completely what happened; but in all honesty, I find this doubtful. Self-aggrandized propagandists (just like governments) somehow always seem to evade culpability for the results of their actions. In their comfortable studios with their corporate security guards, they hold forth and dogmatize on what sacrifices need to be made; leaving it for others to actually sweat, bleed, and die. Unfortunately, that seems to be the way of the modern world. Perhaps, in any event, it doesn't really matter. The Greek Philosopher Epictetus implied that History is not the record of men's deeds, but the record of men's reactions to those deeds.<sup>15</sup> The obvious corollary is that in a society increasingly disavowing any moral or ethical standard greater than instant self-aggrandizement; history's judgement will be rendered by polemicists and propagandists from the smoky-mirrored stages of the broadcast media. And just as happened with my generation, it will not be the people who failed to keep faith. It will be the government that breached faith with the People--and in the end, with American Ideals.

**End Notes:**

1- The Black Tom explosion in Jersey City, NJ in July 1916 sabotaging American Munitions destined for shipment to the Allies by German Agents.

2- German shelling of Paris through out the war.

3- 1920-29:

Italian Invasion of Libya

Chinese Civil War

1930-39:

Japanese Occupation of Manchuria (Mukden)

Spanish Civil War

1940-49:

French Indo-China War

First Arab-Israeli War

1950-1959:

Korean War

Suez Incident

1960-1969:

Vietnam War

Six Day War in Middle East

1970-79:

Khmer Rouge insurgency and fall of Phnom Penh

Yom Kippur War in the Middle East

1980-89:

The Falkland Islands War

Iran-Iraq War

1990-99:

Gulf War

Serbo-Kosovo Balkans War

2000-10:

Iraq-Afghanistan War

Israeli Incursion into Gaza

2010-Present:

Civil War-Democratic Republic of Congo

French Incursions in Libya and Mali

4- The rise of Japan as a major maritime power at the bidding of Great Britain to attack the German Fleet in Tsing-Tao, China.

5- Collapse of the German Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire.

6- General Eric von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff at the Battle of Verdun.

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11- Albats, Y. and Fitzpatrick, C., *The State Within a State: the KGB and Its Hold on Russia - Past, Present, and Future.* ISBN: 0-374-52738-5.

12- Wakefield, R., *Radio Broadcasting At Union College Schenectady, NY: A Brief History.*  
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13- Murrow, E.R., *Speech Before the Radio and Television News Directors Association.*  
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14- McLuhan, M., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* 1964:McGraw-Hill, Canada  
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15- Epictetus, *The Enchiridion (The Handbook).* Trans. White, N.P., 1983:Hacket Publishing  
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