

THOMAS VARGISH

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*The Authority of Crises*

“I’ll show you where the iron crosses grow.”

—Sergeant Steiner in *Cross of Iron*

**N**ATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CRISES permit the radical inflation of political and military power. Although this syndrome is not new—we can find it in Antigone’s Thebes and in Caesar’s Rome—it developed into a regularly exploited pattern during the past century, encouraged by the rise of dictatorship in Europe and by certain corresponding developments in political ideology.

It is therefore not surprising to find this distention of authority clearly represented in the three major fictional dystopias of the first half of the twentieth century: Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1920), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). The literary form of the dystopia aims at bringing into high relief the nature of contemporary political policy and practice; it thus offers us a particularly self-conscious embodiment of the nexus of history and literature. Here we can see that the hypothetical transition from democracy to dictatorship is the same in each novel: a traumatic historical event or series of events leads to the creation of a political organization (dictatorship or oligarchy) that imposes a rigorous form of social stability. The narrator of *We* refers to a “two hundred years’ war” that persuaded the surviving population to surround itself with glass walls in a city isolated from “nature” and from all non-mathematical or “savage” uncertainties:

In the thirty-fifth year before the foundation of the United State [sic] our contemporary petroleum food was invented. True, only about two tenths of the population did not die out. . . . Accordingly, the 0.2 which survived have enjoyed the greatest happiness in the bosom of the United State.<sup>1</sup>

In *Brave New World* we find comparable references to a “Nine Years’ War” and a “British Museum Massacre” that destroyed “historical monuments” and left the direction of the state in the hands of benevolent social engineers who adopted the motto “COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.”<sup>2</sup> In 1984 the fundamentally sadistic “Inner Party” achieved control during “a long series of wars and revolutions” or after “the atomic bomb had fallen on Colchester.”<sup>3</sup> Once the catastrophe has permitted the destruction of democratic institutions in these three dystopias the progress of history comes to an end, replaced by a permanent stability in which no significant change takes place. In 1984, the illusion of change is built into the system by the Inner Party for consumption by the comparatively large and ignorant Outer Party. Most important is the constructed illusion of continual military crisis as alliances and frontiers shift unimportantly among the three superpowers. This constructed illusion of crisis justifies the oligarchic domination by the Inner Party for whose political aggrandizement the whole social order functions. From this point in our discussion I will call the fabrication or the developed illusion of crisis for the purpose of consolidating power *strategic crisis*, even when the initiating events for such constructions may not be planned.

Orwell’s depiction of strategic crisis tells us that in 1984 the political opportunities and dangers to authority do not depend on the actuality of the crisis. They depend on the perception of crisis. It is no surprise that the perception of crisis has been useful to those who wish to attack and replace the existing power structure. Again, literary examples can help us focus. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* Brutus and his co-conspirators see Caesar’s return to Rome as a crisis and this view of the matter, whether accurate or not, permits the assassination: “It must be by his death.”<sup>4</sup> In another of Shakespeare’s tragedies, King Richard II creates a political crisis by confiscating Bullingbrook’s patrimony to pay the costs of a war in Ireland. This action, represented as a military crisis, in turn permits Bullingbrook to take over the throne under the guise of a crisis of royal prerogative. In fact, a managed perception of crisis has proved useful to monarchs and dictators from the literary Creon to the historical Saddam Hussein and has been very skillfully developed in our own time.

There even exists a kind of political theory attached to it, lucidly presented in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940) with reference to European and particularly Russian communism under Stalin (an historical example we will visit

at greater length further on). The doomed party chief Ivanov tells the doomed party chief Rubashov:

“In times of need—and politics are chronically in a time of need—the rulers were always able to evoke ‘exceptional circumstances’, which demanded exceptional measures of defence. Since the existence of nations and classes, they live in a permanent state of mutual self-defence, which forces them eternally to defer to another time the putting into practice of humanism. . . .”<sup>65</sup>

Or, as Rubashov himself puts it in his diary: “at [history’s] critical turning points there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means.”<sup>66</sup> Once this is accepted all that remains to be done is to project the doctrine of the critical turning point, the moment of historical crisis.

### *Billy Budd, Sailor*

But if the immediate usefulness of the perception of crisis to political power seems generally understood and widely practiced, the psychological or inner dynamics—the profound effects on creativity and knowledge as forms of authority—remain comparatively unexamined. These inner dynamics are central to our understanding of authority and leadership as they currently function. In order to explore these psychological events (which are both effects and causes) briefly but concretely, I turn to a text that has become a classic study of the relation of power to ethics and the effects of crisis on this relationship, Herman Melville’s great short novel *Billy Budd, Sailor* (*An inside narrative*) (published in 1924, thirty-three years after the author’s death). The subtitle has generally been taken to refer to the inner elements—the narrative goes inside the characters—but to those who know Melville’s work (for example, *Moby-Dick* and “Bartleby”) it also carries a suggestion that the deeper significance will somehow be found “inside” the main or obvious narrative. It hints at a narrative contained within the narrative, an inside narrative or dark script for insiders that contains truths too radically negative, too incompatible with established religious and ethical ideology for common consumption.

The public historical crisis (or “outside narrative”) in *Billy Budd*, as in our three dystopias, is war. In 1797, Britain is at war with revolutionary France and a serious mutiny, “the Great Mutiny” at the Nore, has radically compounded the sense of danger in the British fleet:

At sea, precautionary vigilance was strained against relapse. At short notice an engagement might come on. When it did, the lieutenants assigned to batteries felt it incumbent on them, in some instances, to stand with drawn swords behind the men working the guns.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background of a double threat, an undeniable historical crisis, external from the attacks of the French and internal from the mutiny of British sailors, the story of Billy Budd unfolds. Billy—an image of youthful beauty, strength, and innocence—is impressed from a merchant ship called *Rights-of-Man* to serve in the British warship *Bellipotent*. Here, for reasons that remain obscure or metaphysical, a diabolical petty officer, John Claggart, accuses him of treason. Because a speech impediment prevents him from declaring his innocence, Billy expresses his indignation in a lethal blow, which Captain Vere witnesses.

Vere instantly leaps to a conclusive course of action: “Fated boy,” he exclaims, “what have you done?” and “Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” From this point forward Vere arranges things so that only a guilty verdict can emerge from the drumhead court of men picked for their simple loyalty rather than for legal or ethical acuity, people who will expect their captain to explain everything. This enables him to dominate the process. Vere adopts the role of sole witness to the crime, temporarily “sinking his rank” but at the same time maintaining control by testifying from the ship’s weather side and so keeping the court downwind from the actual source of authority, himself. In this way he exploits a dominant leadership characteristic of ambiguity: “reserving to himself, as the one on whom ultimate accountability would rest, the right of maintaining a supervision of [the court], or formally or informally interposing at need.”<sup>8</sup>

Vere recognizes Billy’s innocence of intention (just as he had glimpsed the dead Claggart’s mysterious evil) and he shows the officers of the court that he does. When Billy protests his innocence of treason Vere says, “I believe you, my man.” But his calculated responses to the questions of the officers after Billy has finished testifying show that he can conceive of only one outcome and that outcome is hanging. His sense of crisis and of the absolute nature of military law in the face of crisis leads him to shut door after door on the various alternatives proposed. When the officer of the marines points out that much of the accusation remains murky, Vere asserts that the “mystery” may be metaphysical, “a mystery of iniquity,” and in any case is irrelevant to the proceeding: “The prisoner’s deed—with that alone we have to do.” When the officer points out that “surely Budd proposed neither mutiny nor homicide,” Vere agrees but again decrees that motive be treated as irrelevant: “War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War’s child, takes after the father. Budd’s intent or non-intent is nothing to the

purpose.” He derogates pity and compassion in a traditionally gendered argument: “Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as [a] piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out.”<sup>9</sup> In various ways Vere rules out religion, civil law, and all arguments based on nature and natural law. He is left with the Mutiny Act.

Just how arbitrary these exclusions really are can only be seen if we blot out the military crisis. It is the crisis that permits and empowers Vere’s arguments, reducing other considerations to an apparently secondary degree of importance:

“You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm—the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them—afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles. What shame to us such a conjecture on their part, and how deadly to discipline.”<sup>10</sup>

This view of things seems plausible to us because we are accustomed to think in terms of individual sacrifice for social good. It plays to our sense that the interests of the individual and the interests of the larger social order are necessarily in conflict, and that the proper calculus will show that the needs of the social order must receive primary consideration. Of course in wartime attention to personal need can weaken discipline, can weaken “our” side as a military power and endanger us. In wartime such danger can be regarded as absolute, which is how Vere regards it. He points to what he considers the *impossibility* of showing what may be regarded as weakness.

In this absolute claim on behalf of the social interest, Vere paradoxically appears to be isolated. His attempt to transform the historical crisis into a strategic crisis succeeds in leading to Billy’s conviction but not in persuading his subordinates. The ship’s surgeon, called in to confirm Claggart’s death, believes that the best (and most usual) practice would be to sequester Billy and refer the whole matter to the admiral of the fleet. He sees Vere’s agitation and wonders if he has become “unhinged,” a speculation that the narrator does not reject: “But assuming that he is, it is not so susceptible of proof. What then can the surgeon do?” The narrator had told us earlier of certain kinds of madmen who disguise their insanity with a “perfectly rational” outward conduct. Although this discussion is not directly applied to the captain, the narrator observes that whether Vere is sane or not “every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford.” And finally, Vere isolates himself in his complete conviction that Billy must hang. The

picked officers of his court are “less convinced than agitated” by his arguments. They do not so much agree with his conviction as they despair of being able to disagree.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most painful aspects of the painful story of *Billy Budd* has to do with the conflict Vere himself experiences, that inner narrative more concisely explored by literature than by history or journalism. “He was no lover of authority for mere authority’s sake.”<sup>12</sup> He is no simple executioner or cynical apparatchik, but a devout believer in the imperative of crisis and an equally firm believer in Billy’s innocence. In Captain Vere the conflict between individual innocence and social necessity is internalized so that we can infer another trial, an inner narrative, taking place in Vere’s mind or soul. His affection for Billy is, as we have seen, augmented by his belief that the young sailor, an “angel of God,” represents a cosmic or metaphysical purity. In symbol and allusion the narrative bears him out. And yet this perception does not prevent Vere from seeing to it that Billy is executed. The historical crisis, as we have seen, appears to mandate the summary execution. The psychological condition of the person in authority—Creon, Brutus, Vere, Stalin—authorizes the absolute parameters that rationalize the absolute solutions.

Vere’s action in shutting door after door of what his officers regard as reasonable and traditional considerations suggests an inner disorder. What I have elsewhere called “Captain Vere’s Disease” results from a confusion of means with ends.<sup>13</sup> Because the ends are of supreme importance there are no means that cannot be justified. In fact, as Captain Vere argues to the court, the means ought to be consonant with the end in view. If absolute discipline must be maintained then absolute punishment, execution, represents that best. But what lifts Vere above the psychopath and above the apparatchik is the agony his own solution causes him. Captain Vere not only recognizes Billy’s innocence but feels a paternal affection for him. We are told that “the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation.” Billy himself recognizes this in his last words, “God bless Captain Vere!”<sup>14</sup> And we are left with the troubling implication that Vere’s affection for Billy, far from impelling him to clemency, actually reinforces the absolutism. It seems to be a kind of perverse Calvinism: you know you are doing the right thing when you choose the solution with the greatest suffering. In the doctrine of crises pain becomes a positive value.

Vere’s courage lies in choosing his own pain in the interest of what he perceives as a supreme goal, supreme in his role as commander. His secret moral deformity lies in a narrowness of vision and imagination, in failing to see that in closing the doors to alternative possibilities he has removed his military solution from everything worth fighting for. Vere has elevated his idea of the Mutiny Act to the status of an absolute value and then proceeded as if there were no available counter-values—despite the fact that his officers in their elementary way suggest at least three: from

religion, from nature, and from human justice. Vere thus restricts his judgment to a mechanical level common among far less altruistic and courageous leaders, far more cynical practitioners of strategic crisis.

The case of *Billy Budd, Sailor* is complex because its applications are various: it possesses social, legal, and metaphysical significance. Its psychological analysis of Vere's twisted sense of duty has great resonance for us today. But in one important sense it is straightforward. It treats a man being punished for an act he has actually committed, punished by another man who really does believe in the larger necessity—if not the justice—of what he thinks he must do. And the action takes place in the context of an undoubted, immediate military crisis evident to all parties, validated by consensus. But such straightforward conditions are rare among our more recent crises. What happens when the conditions undergo a sinister modification, when innocent people serve as scapegoats in much more equivocal circumstances and at the hands of those who have much to gain from the perception of crisis? This, after all, must be a much more common occurrence, even in wartime—or perhaps especially in wartime. It is brilliantly represented in Stanley Kubrick's celebrated film of 1957, *Paths of Glory*.

### *Paths of Glory*

Here the crisis is manufactured or, rather, staged. We are in World War I. The French and the Germans are bogged down opposite each other and have been fighting for months over a few hundred meters of trenches and barbed wire. The French generals (played by Adolphe Menjou and George Macready), harassed by the press for some kind of decisive result and motivated by personal ambition, decree that a fortified German position, the “anthill,” will be taken at short notice by their exhausted, depleted troops. The hopeless attack fails. Now in need of scapegoats they determine that three men, chosen arbitrarily by their company commanders, will face a court-martial. The scapegoats are defended by Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas), a criminal lawyer before the war and a valiant (though skeptical) leader of the failed attack. This court, infinitely more cynical than Captain Vere's, condemns the three men in a summary trial of which no record is kept and which permits no discussion of motive, character, or previous service. Having failed in court but determined to save his soldiers, Dax attempts to blackmail General Broulard with documented information that General Mireau in a fit of rage ordered artillery fire on his own men. The blackmail attempt fails and the executions take place with appalling due ceremony.

The blackmail attempt fails because general Broulard misinterprets Colonel Dax's intentions. Broulard assumes that Dax is a player in the game of military promotion, so after the execution he offers Dax the position of the now terminally

disgraced General Mireau. When he learns that Dax actually wanted to save the lives of the soldiers, he is forced to reinterpret events:

“Colonel Dax, you’re a disappointment to me. You’ve spoiled the keenness of your mind by wallowing in sentimentality. You really did want to save those men, and you were not angling for Mireau’s command. You’re an idealist, and I pity you as I would the village idiot. We’re fighting a war, Dax, a war that we’ve got to win.”

Broulard implies that wars are won not merely on the field but in the realm of public opinion and personal ambition—the realm, that is, of perception. Mireau has to go because he played the game badly and so lost his position by becoming vulnerable to Dax. “Well,” Broulard sighs, “it had to be done. France cannot afford to have fools heading her military destiny.” If you can’t play the game then you don’t deserve to lead; if you don’t understand the strategy of crisis and the advantage it gives to ambitious players then you are not capable of representing the social, national, institutional interest. It’s a form of Darwinism: if you can’t save yourself you can’t be trusted to save others—and, as Brutus discovered before Dax, idealism proves a debilitating handicap.

### **Strategic Crisis and the Great Terror**

*Paths of Glory* was banned in France on political grounds for eighteen years and also from U.S. military bases in Europe. During the Cold War it was regarded as a subversive film, as indeed it is—subversive of the manipulation of events at the cost of innocent lives. It told too much. The game of crises is always played behind the mask of duty. By its very nature the real agenda cannot be disclosed. The crisis must always be perceived as real and is always presented as real by masters of the art like Hitler, Stalin, and their smaller contemporary echoes in such figures as Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. Whenever it appears expedient to put aside ordinary laws and procedures a crisis can be declared. This technique is by now so well understood that when a leader seems to be losing some kind of authority, such as Margaret Thatcher’s decline in popularity in the 1980s or Bill Clinton’s disgrace during the Monica Lewinsky affair in the late 90s, the authenticity of unconnected events, like the Falklands invasion by Argentina or Saddam’s rejection of the United Nations arms inspections, events that distract attention from domestic difficulties, become suspect. We ask whether the crisis was engineered, staged in the interest of retaining political power. What is most worrying at the present historical moment is not the obviously cynical use of crisis by dictators but the danger of a long slow slide of western democracies into a grey

region where playing the game of crisis becomes chronic, obscuring the perception of actual urgency and leading to a general acceptance of manipulation in the representation of events.

Nevertheless, at this point it seems more illuminating to follow the authority of crisis precisely as it may be practiced in an historical political culture entirely given over to it. An example of such a culture can be found in the Soviet Union before, during, and after the “Great Terror” of 1936 to 1938. In order to secure absolute power to himself and to confirm the Soviet Union in dictatorship, Stalin created an atmosphere of almost continuous crisis and used the strategy of crisis to justify a degree of brutality so extreme as to exceed the limits of comprehension for observers in the Western democracies. His purges, executions, concentration camps—the repeated destruction of governmental structures and the repeated annihilation of leadership at precisely the historical moment when Russia was about to face its greatest external threats from east and west—seemed to “make no sense”; and because these practices were lacking in sense the West was unable to credit them despite sufficient evidence and eyewitness reports. It seemed impossible that Stalin would choose to undermine and level vital administrative and military agencies of his government and exterminate their leadership during the period when German and Japanese forces were growing and spreading. And yet that is what Stalin did. He did it because he had a higher priority than the territorial security of the Soviet Union. It is only when strategic crisis is fully understood that we can come to terms with what happened. It is only when we understand that the strategy of crisis as practiced in twentieth-century politics often has very little to do with threats from nature or from other nations and always has everything to do with the consolidation of power within the political system that we can “make sense” of the Soviet disaster and Stalin’s methodical development of it. In the words of the historian Robert Conquest, “Common sense gets us nowhere.”<sup>55</sup>

When Conquest first published *The Great Terror* in 1970 he calculated the deaths from Stalin’s purges and other policies aimed at repressing even the remotest possibility of political opposition at twenty million. “This figure is now given in the USSR,” Conquest wrote in 1990, “And the general total of repressed is now stated (e.g. in the new high-school textbooks) as around 40 million, about half of them in the peasant terror of 1929 to 1933 and the other half from 1937 to 1953.” The complete success of Stalin’s method may be judged by the fact that when the appalling consequences for the Soviet Union of his grotesque pact with Hitler became clear with the German invasion of 1941 there was no one to hold him to account: “Stalin’s victory on the political front had been complete. Now in the disaster arising from his own miscalculation, no move to replace him was possible. Subjected to this very severe test, the Purge proved to have accomplished its object.”<sup>56</sup> By calculated, continuous, arbitrary repression Stalin had secured

total power to himself, and although his motives and his practices may have been paranoid they were not irrational. In the theory and exercise of the doctrine of strategic crisis they made uncommon sense.

History had handed the technique to Stalin. The Bolsheviks (after 1918 the Russian Communist Party) early developed the practice of closing ranks in the face of any kind of threat. From before the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, through the first world war and a humiliating treaty with Germany, and continuing with the Civil War of 1918-20, the idea that historical (military and revolutionary) pressure mandated and justified the use of extreme measures developed into a habit of mind. By the time Stalin became general secretary of the party in 1922, he and his colleagues were at the center of a political culture that had come to practice and to accept almost intuitively a pervasive mendacity in public affairs and a ruthless extralegal repression of perceived opposition from within the ranks as well as from without. Stalin was to take these practices beyond the limits of the early twentieth-century western imagination, but he did not initiate them. The tools of strategic crisis were ready to his hand. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it: “we Soviet people stepped upon the soil of the Archipelago spiritually disarmed—long since prepared to be corrupted, already tinged by it. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

We can see the habit of mind that develops from the consistent exercise of crisis strategy almost everywhere in Soviet history up through the death of Stalin in 1953. In fact, it might be more difficult to find a policy decision not dictated by this habit of mind than to offer examples of it. It was at work everywhere and throughout the period. For example, in January of 1930 the Central Committee changed the goal of collectivizing agriculture from twenty per cent of the sown area to complete collectivization and radically shortened the time period in which this was scheduled to be accomplished. In other words, the Committee mandated a crisis. The peasants rebelled, and some chose to kill their livestock rather than submit: “26.6 million head of cattle were slaughtered, 15.3 million horses.”<sup>18</sup> The new goal was abandoned, technically a defeat for Stalin’s policy. But the actual effect of the technical failure was to permit Stalin to rid himself of the remaining opposition in the Politburo by transferring the blame.<sup>19</sup> The example is complete: the crisis is actively created out of available material (natural disaster, foreign threat, or—as in this case—putative historical necessity), steps are taken that increase the level of anxiety or fear, and the whole event leads to the consolidation of political power, which was the real objective all along.

The touchstone that tells whether a policy constitutes a strategy of crisis or merely a failed attempt to achieve a stated objective has to do with the relation between the stated goals and the goals either actually achieved or those that absorb most of the available resources. I have elsewhere observed that the ultimate agenda for any absolute system is the perpetuation of the system, and that the putative goals

that any absolute system is supposed to achieve are always secondary. All terrorist systems are absolute systems in that they do not admit negotiation, and the fact that the ultimate agenda of such action is not what the perpetrators of the action claim (and may actually believe) makes such systems very difficult to understand and to deal with.<sup>20</sup> We can see this in the glacial reluctance of the West to comprehend the scope of terror in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Who in the western democracies could have anticipated a sequence of events like the following?

By the end of the 1920s, the country had, however reluctantly, accepted the existence and stability of the Soviet Government. And that Government had, in turn, made slight economic and other concessions which had led to comparative prosperity. *It was in cold blood, quite deliberately and unprovokedly, that Stalin started a new cycle of suffering.* First had come the Party's war on the peasantry. When this had done its worst and things were settling down again in the mid-1930s, the Great Terror was again launched cold-bloodedly at a helpless population. And the cold-bloodedness was compounded by the other distinguishing quality of the Stalin purge—*the total falsehood of all the reasons given for it and accusations made during it.*<sup>21</sup>

Conquest asserts—with the rough agreement of most specialists—that the death toll among the peasants in the terror-famine created and organized by Stalin “cannot have been lower than 6 to 7 million; and the “death toll among the peasantry over the whole period 1930 to 1933 is given in recent Soviet literature as around 10 million—higher than the dead of all the belligerents put together in the First World War. That is, it was on a scale as large as that of the subsequent ‘Great Terror.’” He goes on to point out that this disaster, rather than calling Stalin's leadership into question, actually consolidated it:

In the struggle with the people there was no room for neutrality. Loyalty could be called for from the Party membership on a war basis. He could demand absolute solidarity and use all rigor in stamping out weakness. The atmosphere of civil war resembled that of the foreign wars which autocrats have launched, throughout history, to enable them to silence the voices of criticism, to eliminate waverers. It was, once again, a question of “My party right or wrong.” The oppositionists made no move.<sup>22</sup>

The oppositionists made no move because they too had internalized the habit of mind that accompanies the regular practice of strategic crisis. Nikolai Bukharin, who was to die in the Great Terror after a difficult show trial, spoke in relation to the destruction of the peasants of the “mass annihilation of completely defenseless men, together with their wives and children.” And as Conquest observes,

he was even more concerned with the effect on the Party. Many Communists had been severely shaken. Some had committed suicide; others had gone mad. In his view, the worst result of the terror and famine in the country was not so much the sufferings of the peasantry, horrible though these were. It was the “deep changes in the psychological outlook of those Communists who participated in this campaign, and instead of going mad, became professional bureaucrats for whom terror was henceforth a normal method of administration, and obedience to any order from above a high virtue.” He spoke of a “real dehumanization of the people working in the Soviet apparatus.”<sup>23</sup>

### “Permanent Crisis” as a “Normal State”

This dehumanization is the psychological correlation of the culture of terror as justified by crisis. Each state of emergency justifies further incursions into the ethical boundaries set up to protect personal and institutional life. The strategy of crisis enabled Stalin effectually to ignore constitutional as well as traditional ethical constraints and ultimately to base all actions on personal decision. Nevertheless, for most of the period Stalin’s decisions were clothed in official rationale, almost always largely mendacious. The torture used to extract confessions to preposterous conspiracies and other crimes for the purpose of the show trials serves as a marker for the destruction of historical accuracy. It was a technique explored by Orwell in *1984* where the Inner Party is not content only to force confession by torture but in some cases to destroy the minds of victims so that they actually believe in their own guilt and in the justice of the proceedings used against them. What Orwell did not quite acknowledge was the degree to which Stalin and his torturers actually approached this goal. Again in the words of Robert Conquest,

One forms the impression of a determination to break the idea of truth, to impose on everyone the acceptance of official falsehood. In fact, over and above the rational

motives for the extraction of confession, one seems to sense an almost metaphysical preference for it.<sup>24</sup>

In Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, a novel that was published in Britain in 1940 and that dealt expressively with the Terror (except for its statistically vast extent), the protagonist Rubashov loses his self-confidence, his ability to believe in himself: "*The fact is: I no longer believe in my infallibility. That is why I am lost.*"<sup>25</sup> We are led to believe that this failure of nerve, this failure to believe in himself as a leading instrument in an inexorable historical process, began long before the action of the novel. In placing the historical process, as conceived by Soviet communism, above truth, above accuracy and memory, the Party created a phalanx of specialists in what Orwell was to call "doublethink"; and this practice of sacrificing accuracy to the interests of the revolution made those who suffered in the Terror exceedingly vulnerable. Having practiced the prescribed duplicity when they were in office how could they defend themselves against charges made in the interest of "The Revolution" or of "History?" The word "history" itself—as those of us who lived through the Cold War can attest—developed a sinister double meaning when applied to the conflict with the Soviets, reaching a kind of grim climax in Khrushchev's boast that it would dictate the burial of the western democracies.

Koestler has Rubashov and his interrogator—a young "Neanderthal" who grew up under the system of duplicity and not an Old Bolshevik—actually lose touch with real events, actually lose the ability to know and to remember what happened in fact and what the prescribed narrative of Rubashov's confession demands:

Without becoming aware of it, they had got accustomed to these rules for their game, and neither of them distinguished any longer between actions which Rubashov had committed in fact and those which he merely should have committed as a consequence of his opinions; they had gradually lost the sense of appearance and reality, logical fiction and fact. Rubashov would occasionally become conscious of this in his rare moments of clearheadedness, and he would then have the sensation of awakening from a strange state of intoxication; Gletkin, on the other hand, seemed never to be aware of it.<sup>26</sup>

Gletkin never seems to be aware of it because the distinction does not matter to him. Having risen out of a peasant background to the level of a secret service interrogator, he has only one priority: to further the interests of the Party and thus of the Revolution. He has bypassed what most of us mean by "history": the unbiased retrievable consensus-based account of actual events.

In a rare and strangely moving dialogue with Rubashov, Gletkin explains what “time” might mean to a peasant, to someone who has never possessed a watch:

“In my village, when the peasants had to travel to town, they would go to the railway station at sunrise and lie down to sleep in the waiting-room until the train came, which was usually at about midday; sometimes it only came in the evening or the next morning. These are the peasants who now work in our factories.”<sup>27</sup>

These, indeed, are the peasants who have never known history as we in the western democracies have known it. We can say that Gletkin himself has moved directly from a prehistoric social order to a post-historical state—provided that what we mean by history is the consensus-based account of actual events and not the inexorable force of Marxist dialectical materialism.

What can it be that would justify what Robert Conquest called the determination “to break the idea of truth”? Koestler deals with this as well. In the first place there exists the possibility that Stalin might actually be what he claims to be. Or as Rubashov puts it to himself,

The horror which No. 1 emanated above all consisted in the possibility that he was in the right, and that all those whom he killed had to admit, even with the bullet in the back of their necks, that he conceivably might be in the right. There was no certainty; only the appeal to that mocking oracle they called History, who gave her sentence only when the jaws of the appellant had long since fallen to dust.

That is, to the revolutionary idea of History as ineluctable dialectical force that under Stalinist communism supplanted the older, humane ideal of historical truth. And, of course, it is the Party that embodies History. As Rubashov before his final arrest tells a bewildered and despairing young agent:

“The Party can never be mistaken. . . . You and I can make a mistake. Not the Party. The Party, comrade, is more than you and I and a thousand others like you and I. The Party is the embodiment of the revolutionary idea in history. History knows no scruples and no hesitation. Inert and unerring, she flows towards her goal. At every bend in her course she leaves the mud which she carries

and the corpses of the drowned. History knows her way. She makes no mistakes. He who has not absolute faith in History does not belong in the Party's ranks."<sup>28</sup>

Or, as one non-fictional party member put it,

a Bolshevik was not someone who believed merely in Marxism but "someone who had absolute faith in the Party no matter what. A person with the ability to adapt his morality and conscience in such a way that he can universally accept the dogma that the Party is never wrong."<sup>29</sup>

To see the Party as the embodiment of History and No. 1 as the embodiment of the Party leads inevitably back to the strategy of crisis. As the Old Bolshevik Ivanov reminds Rubashov in a Soviet version of Marxist doctrine: "Since the invention of the steam engine [i.e., since the beginning of the industrial revolution] the world has been permanently in an abnormal state; the wars and revolutions are just the visible expressions of this state."<sup>30</sup> And, as we have seen, the state of crisis, of permanent abnormality, justifies the means necessary for the Party's "History" to work its way to its end. But what is a "permanently abnormal state?" Isn't this an oxymoron? If a state of affairs is permanent doesn't that state of affairs become the normal state? And doesn't this lead us to an inherent contradiction in the strategy of crisis? Can one have a permanent crisis?

This obtuse perversion of reason and language is an appalling sign to those of us unwilling to forget the political history of the twentieth century. Modern totalitarianism invariably reeks of such contradiction, of such scandal (as Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell show us), but that has not prevented its serial revival. When we ask if the rationale inherent in the strategy of crisis leads to a logical anomaly, an assertion of crisis as the normal state of affairs, we are obliged to answer that it does. But in the history I have briefly echoed, the history of the Great Terror, logic and reason seem poor tools with which to respond. The contradictions and the scandals and the destruction of old-style historical truth may finally be empowered by the correlative destruction of reason and of logic itself. Logic and reason may have gone the way of historical truth in such a state, enabling the normalcy and permanence of crisis—of crisis, that is, in its strategic application. We have seen it happen.

## Notes

1. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, Trans. G. Zilboorg (New York: Dutton, 1952), 22.
2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 34, 1.
3. George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 156, 30.
4. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. S. F. Johnson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), II.i.10.
5. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (London: Vintage, 1994), 128. First published 1940.
6. Koestler, 81, his emphasis.
7. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 308.
8. Melville, 350, 352, 355.
9. Melville, 357-366.
10. Melville, 364.
11. Melville, 352-353, 326, 353.
12. Melville, 355.
13. Thomas Vargish, "The Value of Humanities in Executive Development," *Sloan Management Review* (Spring, 1991), 89-90.
14. Melville, 367, 375.
15. Robert Conquest. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 72.
16. Conquest, 486, 441.
17. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willetts (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 319.
18. Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 47.
19. Conquest, 18-19.
20. Thomas Vargish, "Self-Qualifying Systems: Consensus and Dissent in Postmodernity" in *Rewriting Democracy*, ed. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 119-120.
21. Conquest, 251, my italics.
22. Conquest 21.
23. Conquest 22.

24. Conquest 131.
25. Kessler, 84, his emphasis.
26. Kessler, 179.
27. Kessler, 180.
28. Kessler, 18, 40-41.
29. Montefiore, 86.
30. Kessler, 127.



**THOMAS VARGISH** teaches literature and film at the United States Air Force Academy. He has published books and essays on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and cultural history. Professor Vargish holds degrees from Columbia, Oxford, Princeton, and Lund universities and has been a Rhodes Scholar and Guggenheim Fellow.