

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY - HOW WILL WE JUDGE IT?

Emery, Aug 95.

From August 1914 to August 1945 we went through World War I, the Great Depression and World War II. Those thirty one years saw a scale of destruction of lives and wealth that was probably, in absolute and relative terms, unprecedented. The scale of human reproduction, 1945-58, and wealth creation, 1952-72, was also unprecedented in human affairs. Both surges disappeared almost as suddenly as they began. Birth rates fell toward, or below, the replacement rate. After 1973 staggering growth in wealth gave way to 'stagflation' and increasingly frequent periods of economic recession. This surge in reproduction and wealth creation, and the subsequent stagnation of both, were contained within a global Cold War. Till almost 1990 the superpowers lined their blocs of nations against each other, maintained them on a war footing and engaged in an intensive arms race. For ten of those years the USA was engaged in serious surrogate wars - Korea, 1951-54, and Viet Nam, 1965-72. As the century draws to a close the Soviet Union, which had emerged in 1917 as the alternative to capitalism, lies in ruins, having collapsed under the weight of the arms race. The 'victor', the USA, is struggling with a well-nigh crippling national debt.

This, in a nut-shell, is the story of the twentieth century.

What explanation, if any, can be offered for the warlike character of the twentieth century? Perhaps war is a feature that is secondary to some other more fundamental feature? One is reluctant to even consider the second question because of the human suffering involved. However, it is not possible to deny the speed with which human populations and societies can recuperate from such losses.

Some previous centuries were unusually warlike and they may give a clue. In the seventeenth and fourteenth centuries the onset of sustained cold, wet weather, with short summers, suddenly plunged Western Europe into relative over-population. Adjustment followed through long periods of warfare, famine and the plague. Incidentally these centuries also saw a radical re-consideration of theories about our species place in the universe. It is likely that the massive migrations of the eleventh, eighth and fifth centuries also reflected sustained climatic changes.

The twentieth century seem to have been warmer, on average, than most recent centuries. The difference does not appear to match in size that seen in earlier warlike centuries that were marked by higher than average temperatures. In any case the effluxes from deserts and fjords that a warm century produced in the past is no longer feasible. The Nordic and Islamic invaders had military advantages. The new outlying populations have had to confront cannon and machine guns that they do not make. The mass migrations that have characterized both war and peace in the twentieth century have not arisen primarily from population pressures. Those migrations have arisen from the insatiable demands that arose from the emergence of capital goods production in the 1880's and the related emergence of cheap mass transportation in the form of steam powered iron ships, railways and tramways. The migration was not due to push factors but to pull plus reduced barriers.

In the above sketch of earlier centuries of marked warfare I have assumed that warfare is endemic to human communities but only becomes of plague proportion when a gross imbalance emerges between the population and resources of some of those communities. Human communities, in those centuries, were based on agriculture, pastoralism or fishing and the margin between starvation and a good life was usually very small. Those dynamics do not adequately describe the twentieth century*. Modern societies exist on a substantial industrial base that rests, in turn, on mineral, water and gas resources relatively untapped by preceding societies. The survival margin is much greater in those societies and their population size seems largely to be determined by the labour requirements of industry.

(* Footnote. That does not exclude the possibility that if world population grows out of control those simple dynamics might not re-emerge.)

With the emergence in the 1880's of a capital goods sector the demand for resources was relatively insatiable. Whilst industry was predominantly concerned with producing consumer goods it was limited, in the last analysis, by its wages bill. Capital goods production intensified demands for raw materials input and labour and was to find an insatiable market in the supply of advanced technology weapons. With the emergence of capital goods production Capitalism was wedded to war. When war, or active war preparations, were not a primary concern, capitalism was in a slump.

The Cold War: a History. Martin Walker, 1994, Henry Holt, 1994.

Walker, from the Guardian, attempts, fairly successfully, to give both sides of the Cold War. In this he has done good work.

My questions arise as he tries to sum up in his last chapter and as he tries to depict the next step for the USA as the *raison d'être* of the Cold War has obviously passed away.

As he sums it up "The main organising principle of American policy for nearly fifty years, opposition to the Soviet Union, slowly disappeared" (p340). I would describe this as the system principle that governed all aspects of the US social system, and the relations it tried to impose on others. This principle extended beyond the CIA and the Armed Forces to all aspects of cultural and intellectual life. Patriotism and religious evangelicism were almost the stones that one could hide under, safe from the system principle, if one were not insane, drugged or criminal.

He quotes with approval the conclusion of the conference of soviet economists on the failure of the Gorbachev economic reforms, June 1987, "Deep transformations in the management of the economy cannot be realised without corresponding changes in the political system and in the social and spiritual spheres" (p304). That is, a change is needed in the system principle.

After exploring the ways in which the USA has failed its citizens Walker ends up by concluding that the USA was "a country which had lost sight of the strategic implications of economic choices." (p347). In his very last paragraph in the book he quotes, with obvious approval, that "Consumerism, not militarism, is the threat to American strength".

It is obvious that Walker has lost his way. He forgets the 1961 farewell address of Eisenhower that he quotes on p138. Eisenhower sought to warn the American people in unambiguous terms that a new monster had emerged in their midst and spread its influence into every area where decisions were made- the military-industrial complex. He has apparently quite forgotten what Orwell had written when the Cold War was first initiated.