

PROLOGUE

*Modern history is like a deaf man
replying to questions that no one has
put to him.*

—TOLSTOY, *War and Peace*

The acceleration of history that we now sense so vividly began a little more than two centuries ago. Since then, humanity seems to have been launched on a wild epic journey whose trajectory is ever more obscure. Tolstoy, with characteristic Russian skill in the depiction of historical tragedy, is the writer who has presented the most gripping picture of that journey. Describing Napoleon's campaigns sixty years after the fact, he does not display any of the romanticism with which other Russians like to speak of the Emperor. Of the fantastic cavalcade through Europe that has fascinated so many great minds, he evokes only a frightful slaughter:

For various reasons known and unknown, the French set about butchering and destroying one another. And with the event comes a corresponding justification in the expressed will of certain men who believe it to be necessary for the good of France, or in the interests of freedom or equality. The butchery stops, and along comes a corresponding justification in terms of the need to centralize power, resist Europe, and so on. Men march from west to east, murdering their fellow creatures, and this event is accompanied by fine words about the glory of France, the vileness of England, and so on. History shows that these forms of justification are no less contradictory than, for instance, murdering somebody as a declaration of his human rights, or murdering millions in Russia to take England down a peg or two.¹

Tolstoy had no way of envisioning the massacres that would be committed after his death, whether in his own country or in distant lands. Nor would he hear the lunatic explanations that would be offered to account for them. If he had, one can imagine the feelings of horror that would have seized him. What is surprising is that he sees the French Revolution and Napoleon's ensuing campaigns as bringing about a transformation that most historians trace back only to the First World War: the transformation of Europeans into barbarians.²

In his narrative of the historical upheavals of early nineteenth-century Europe, there is no doubt that Tolstoy was also thinking of a much larger tragedy, encompassing not only the barbarity of warfare, the power of ideology, and the advent of the masses, but also the opposition between man and history, events and our understanding of them, and politics and ethics. He offers testimony to the fact that more often than not, all that can be discerned in history is frightful confusion—even from the perspective granted by the lapse of a half century. There is barely enough time to observe what is happening or to recall the past—men kill each other, then cease to do so; masses of people move, and more massacres take place—while events just keep following one another like painful reminders of the misunderstanding that prevails between mankind and history. Every period in history provides examples of this very same gap between what humanity predicts, anticipates, or expects and the mass of facts that no one would have thought of but that history constantly deposits in its wake. History seems to answer questions that we have had no time to put to it while we scurry about trying to understand the course of events. The justifications on offer may serve specific causes—the pleasure of princes, reasons of state, the grandeur of liberty—but what do they really tell us about “History with its great axe?”³ Aren't they, rather, attempts to organize in one way or another something that eludes us, while simultaneously exercising the most powerful influence over the course of our existence?

There is nothing specific to the modern world in all this—it is part of the enigma of history. History, real history, is unforeseeable, and that explains the attraction of diplomatic services to *stability*—a key word in international relations, particularly in times when events foster fear of the unexpected. And while the meaning of the enigma eludes us, recognition of its existence is important in itself. If human thought did not question the meaning of a human presence in history and humans' responsibility in

history's unfolding, it would lose one of its greatest subjects. But while the enigma is common to all stages of human history, modernity has drastically altered some essential phenomena—Tolstoy already understood something of that when he wrote his most important book. The pulse of time has changed, and its tempo sometimes accelerates to such a degree that the two interlocutors—man and history—are increasingly *out of phase* with each other. That gap has today become so striking that it could serve as one of the definitions for the spirit of our age. And we now have also to reckon with a scale so vast that it encompasses the entire planet and echoes from the most distant shores.

With such complexity added to the enigma, it is not surprising that the dialogue between man and history is full of inconsistencies. How is it possible to contain the consequences of what one undertakes? How can we avoid having the whole world intervene in what we decide on our own territory? Is it strange that man has lost the ability to understand what is happening around him, when everything seems inextricably tangled? And should we be indignant, seeing him fall prey to a kind of mental and moral confusion, to a chaos in ideas and behavior that seems even worse than the chaos of events?⁴

The conviction that it is increasingly difficult for human thought to grasp the meaning of the clamor of history—closer as it is to deafening cacophony than to a melody recognizable to the human ear—finds a troubling echo in the judgment of a mind very different from that of Tolstoy, but equally disturbed by the disorder of the world. In a classic passage, Paul Valéry observed:

The unforeseen itself is in the process of transformation, and what is unforeseen in the modern world has become almost unlimited. The imagination fails in the face of it. . . . Instead of, as in the past, playing an honest card game with fate, knowing the rules, knowing the number of cards and face cards, we are now in the position of a player who is astonished to discover that his adversary's hand contains face cards never seen before and that the rules of the game change with each hand.⁵

History does not progress in a continuous fashion, nor does it even move forward in spurts. It seems to have abandoned any intelligible pattern and to have literally gone off the rails. Valéry's words might well be adopted by

the generation that lived through September 11, 2001, a generation inclined to believe that events display a complexity that exceeds their imagination. Spectacular upheavals and sudden reversals are the defining characteristics of our time.⁶

Our forebears in the early twentieth century were also aware of a dangerous rift between humanity and historical reality. The possibility of sudden storms was not unknown to them. They were surprised by them as we are, and suffered as we do from their effects. How can we fail to understand them? Only an almost unthinkable series of absurdities, in Vienna, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, and finally in Paris, could have set ablaze all Europe as well as a large part of the rest of the world, after the assassination of the nephew of the Austrian Emperor by a Serb nationalist. There had been so many other political assassinations!⁷ What the “Great War” revealed for the first time—and this is the reason it has retained that name in some history books—was that the great powers now found it impossible to contain the most important political decision, the decision to initiate a conflict, within the confines of only two or three nations; they could not stop its engulfing an entire continent. And once the machine had been set in motion, there was no question of holding it back: all continents would be affected.⁸

We have seen that globalization of violence develop in unprecedented ways. Nearly a century later, at a time when interconnections among men and things have never been greater, those who still believe that a good fairy will protect them from a major conflict in far-off Asia, if one were unfortunately to break out, should consider 1914. We Europeans dragged the world into our wars; others will drag us into theirs.

The unforeseen has become our element, the distinctive sign of the strategic relations of our time, along with the velocity of our missiles, the firepower of our arsenals, the development of new technologies, the instantaneous spread of information, and new forms of terrorism. Recent history, punctuated by terrible explosions, natural catastrophes, and great massacres, has shown just how devastating surprises can be.⁹ Such eruptions may serve to recall historical tragedies that we would like to forget. The mixture of violence and suddenness, of instability and disorder, affects our souls as well as our minds.

For that reason, the growing rift between man and history carries with it an ontological risk: it endangers the relationship between human

consciousness and time. Roots in the past, the transmission of values, continuity between the generations, whatever links men to one another—all are threatened by the immediacy in which we live and by the chaos surrounding us. Our present impatience, as much as the devitalization of the past, has transformed time into a vector for agitation and anxiety. That the changes introduced by technological revolutions have been much too rapid for the human mind to absorb only exaggerates the effect. The mind is often reduced to a spectator who no longer expects anything from history, except that it will keep happening.

When we ask of history nothing other than that it go on, we cannot complain if it sometimes provides brutal answers. The fault is also in the human actor. That is precisely the way Valéry's observation concludes: "He cannot even throw the cards in his opponent's face. Why? The fact is that the more he looks at him the more he recognizes himself! . . . The modern world is shaped in the image of the mind of man."¹⁰ The deafness of history is shared by mankind; only spectacular explosions shake them.

What is truly horrifying about the cycle of gratuitous cruelty presented on television screens, with hostages slaughtered like animals and the dead desecrated in cemeteries, is that the images express a kind of visualized "norm" of the extreme violence that prevails in the world. We wonder where it may be leading.¹¹ It troubles us that only great crimes now manage to move us. The return of crime as spectacle has awakened an unease that is all the greater because the spectacle no longer takes place in public, as in the time of Voltaire, but in the comfort of our living rooms. The gap is unbearable, as is the routinization of violence. Thucydides, the most essential reference for anyone meditating on history, claims that some periods express an exasperation with human passions. If that is the case, then our era, like the 1930s, is of the type that gives rise to such exasperation with passions that have run amok, and in which humanism and intellectualism are often condemned because they stand for civilized norms that attempt to restrain passions.

It has been claimed, as the character Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Camus's *La Chute* might have done, that there is scarcely any difference between the murderers who kill innocent victims while filming their torments and the helpless spectators who witness the scenes on their home television screens.¹² In this view, the ideological and social violence that characterize the contemporary world are ubiquitous. That is a comforting way of

justifying and excusing crime, recalling once-fashionable slogans that should have been retired long ago. But we must recognize that if indeed the world has recently been reshaped primarily by terrorism and the reactions terrorism provoked, it is probably because the values that might have contained terrorism before it spread so spectacularly have been greatly weakened, or are completely powerless.

Certainly the world has assumed its present form partly because no political community has attempted to take up the formidable challenge represented by the end of a ferocious century. Memory and imagination were not up to the task. And after forty years of a war that never actually broke out, there was a lack of will as well. Of Raymond Aron's well-known formulation, "improbable war, impossible peace," we chose to consider only the first half and did not ponder the meaning of the second, which suggested the degree to which, in essence, peace was an illusion. At the conclusion of the Cold War, the elites of the countries of Eastern Europe understood better than their counterparts in the West that the continent had to be reconstructed along more radical lines than those set out in the criteria for membership in the European Union promulgated in Copenhagen in 1993. They sometimes wrote eloquently about the meaning of Europe, and it was in their writings that "European values," when invoked after the fall of the iron curtain, seemed still to have some power and some truth.¹³ But power was not on their side.

It was thought possible to resume the grand march toward peace, collective security, and the harmonious development of society after an aberrant interruption attributed to a combination of totalitarian crimes, the cowardice of the free world, and the confrontation between the two blocs. But the "interruption" in question was part of our shared history and could not be disposed of by those who preferred to "take blood for wine."¹⁴ One had only to read a few lines by Varlam Shalamov or Andrei Sinyavsky to understand that we could not get off so lightly, because the century had carried human suffering and the destruction of humanity too far. For example:

I was told a tale in the camp about how Soviet zeks communicated news about themselves and thereby for the first time revealed the secrets of Stalin's labor camps . . . Shortly after the war, somewhere in the depths of the taiga, not far from the ocean, a number of desperate prisoners cut off their hands to free themselves from inhuman labor. They put the severed fingers and hands in

between the planks in loads of excellent building lumber bound in wire and intended for export. Eager to exchange the valuable wood for currency, the authorities paid no attention. And the precious cargo sailed to Great Britain . . . And when the cargo was unloaded, what did they find? Severed hands. They took apart a second, a third load: over and over human flesh between the planks . . . The fact was that they had really cut off their hands. Out of despair.¹⁵

After the First and Second World Wars, the magnitude of the destruction and the upheaval in international relations required that the great powers take radical steps to put the world back on its feet. Margaret MacMillan's account of the 1919 Paris Conference is an essential source on the enormous amount of time, energy, and intelligence the victors of the Great War devoted to the reconstruction of Europe.¹⁶ That the effort ultimately failed and that a second conflict, even more terrible than the first, was unleashed twenty years later, should not erode the admiration we feel for the three great protagonists of the conference: Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau. After the Second World War came the important Geneva Conventions on the laws of war, and it was in the name of the "conscience of mankind" that the Nuremberg tribunal rendered its judgments.

Nothing like those monumental measures was undertaken after the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union, largely because the Cold War had been carried on by spies and experts, not by the people. The novels of John Le Carré thus provide some of the best accounts of this confrontation. As Peter Hennessy has pointed out, the Cold War reversed the process Clausewitz observed in the nineteenth century, by which wars ceased to be a matter for professionals and became a matter for the people.¹⁷ The principal participants in the Cold War were nuclear strategists and intelligence specialists.¹⁸ Policy papers on mutual assured destruction, gradual escalation, and extended deterrence, and encounters at Checkpoint Charlie and in prisoner exchanges on the bridge in Potsdam were what punctuated the Cold War. It was in no way a Third World War. Anyone who makes that claim has completely lost sight of what occurred during the 1914–1918 and 1939–1945 wars and is peculiarly lacking in information on Cold War capabilities and propensities. The declassification in recent decades of numerous secret documents from the 1960s and 1970s gives one some idea of the limitless violence that an authentic world war during the period would have unleashed.

Since a third global war did not take place, it could not help forge a new consciousness among people at large comparable to the one that had played a major role in the reconstruction of international affairs after the two world wars. At the end of the 1980s, the flood of refugees and the destruction of the notorious Berlin Wall awakened strong feelings, particularly in the countries that had suffered most from the division of Europe. But those events did not touch the depths of the human conscience, as had the discovery of the camps and the ruins across Europe forty years before. To be sure, on the other side of what was called the iron curtain, public and private misfortunes had been too numerous and harsh for people to forget very easily. The devastation and the crimes of forty years of cold war, even though spoken of publicly only by associations with a limited audience, such as Memorial in Russia,¹⁹ remain present to every household. Nor are the effects limited to the widespread criminalization in Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian society²⁰ and in the former republics of Central Asia, to the savage conduct of Moscow in Chechnya, or to the massive corruption of the Chinese bureaucracy. Yet the traumatic experience of those crimes in the most directly brutalized societies, as was also true in societies that merely learned of them, had the effect of accustoming the public to the infliction of overwhelming violence and cruelty. What the 1914–1918 war began in the trenches was continued with deportations, prison camps, and the massacre of civilian populations. Once those destructive forces were unleashed in all their savagery, they could not simply be repressed at the end of the Cold War. They will continue to affect people and international relations in coming decades, like the aftershocks of a major earthquake.

In France it took the entire nineteenth century to recover from the French Revolution, but the violent events of the revolutionary period bear no comparison to what Russian, Chinese, or Cambodian society suffered in the twentieth century. And because there was no catharsis anywhere at the end of the 1980s, that past continues to fester in all our minds. The work of memory and of mourning has never been done for the tens of millions of victims of state violence, and the ghosts of those who disappeared have not left us.²¹ That is equally true for Western nations, because we are speaking of a collective tragedy of mankind; moreover, the West often participated directly in the crimes. That was already the case before the onset of the Cold War, when Russians who had joined the German army,

often out of despair, were turned over to Stalin by the Allies, in the knowledge that they would be sent to camps or killed. Support for appalling dictatorships and support of apartheid in the name of the struggle against communism can be included in the same category. Western civil society also shares responsibility: In France, for example, *Les Habits neufs du président Mao* by Simon Leys, one of the first books to denounce Maoist barbarity, was burned at the University of Vincennes in 1968.

In fact, the world as a whole is still disoriented by the storms of the twentieth century. One of the principal signs of the internal disorder is the sheer skepticism about the capacity of the human mind to influence events that has succeeded the great period of historical *experiments*, in the Faustian sense of the term. We often speak of the decline of courage in contemporary societies, but it would be more accurate to say that the era is *discouraged*. The intellectual and spiritual chaos visible everywhere spring from the feverishness of societies that have lost their way, in the resulting boredom, in the destruction of hope for the future, but above all in the decline of confidence in the human spirit.²² That is a worldwide phenomenon, which affects former communist societies, where nationalism is attempting to take the place of Marxism-Leninism or Maoism, as much as Western societies, where hedonism is beginning to come up against its limitations. The only clear message delivered by the huge, diverse crowd that traveled to Rome in April 2005 for the funeral of John Paul II was a message of spiritual hunger. The pope had grasped the distinctive characteristic of humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century, in all the regions of the world, and it allowed him to touch a string in the human spirit that was waiting only to be plucked.

On October 26, 1932, in the house of Maxim Gorky, who lent himself to many of Stalin's staged performances, Stalin told the assembled writers: "Even more than machines, tanks, aeroplanes, we need human souls."²³ It might be objected that the engineering of human souls is the heart of totalitarianism, and that in liberal regimes there can by definition be no question of any such enterprise. That may well be true, but is that a reason to reduce politics, as has been true since the end of the ideological confrontation between East and West, to the treatment of economic and social problems alone? Despite all the speeches about the *values* of Europe, now enshrined in the preamble to the 2005 draft European Constitution, whom do we see in the airplanes of heads of state when they travel abroad but the

representatives of stock market values? How else is the success of an official trip measured but by the financial value of the contracts signed? This limitation of politics, which has made most of our leaders into traveling salesmen, says a good deal about the degradation of an activity that must nonetheless take on ever more burdensome responsibilities. Of course, political figures are merely reflecting a broader development in society, but they have shown themselves unable to rise above a mass trend, as those who count in history are required to do.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the struggle that best reveals the weaknesses of Western societies in opposition to their enemies involves neither the military nor the police nor the judiciary, but intellectual and moral questions. The specific strength that comes from conviction is on the other side. Nor is it an accident that the fact that one can die for an idea has returned in the monstrous form of suicide attacks against civilians throughout the world. Such attacks pose crucial questions to the societies that are their targets. Which ideas do our post-heroic societies find worth defending? How can we make judgments about the affairs of a world in which everything is relative? Where tragedy and death are eliminated from the field of consciousness? Suicide attacks are striking not only because death has come back to us *in that form*, but also simply because it has come back at all.

As early as 1915, in his "Reflections upon War and Death," Freud explained how European societies had eliminated death before it came back to them wearing the terrifying mask of the First World War. The anger of soldiers on leave discovering that life continues as though the hell of the trenches did not exist showed just how powerful the denial of reality was at the time. These are the pictures that passed through their heads when they found themselves in drawing rooms or country houses:

We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole; a lance-corporal crawls a mile and a half on his hands dragging his smashed knee after him; another goes to the dressing station and over his clasped hands bulge his intestines; we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces; we find one man who has held the artery of his arm in his teeth for two hours in order not to bleed to death. The sun goes down, night comes, the shells whine, life is at an end.²⁴

Still, today, the eradication of death from the awareness of Western societies is what their fiercest adversaries perceive most clearly. “You who love life, be warned that we do not fear death.” Such is the message, they believe, that gives them the decisive advantage. They may be right.

The conclusion to these preliminary remarks is simple: if it is not possible to follow the thread of the dialogue between man and history, it is because the two participants are not only out of phase but deeply unsettled. It is a dialogue of the deaf, like one overheard between intimate relations in which anguish makes it impossible to hear anything but inner voices. They continue to speak, in search of a meaning that eludes them—which it cannot fail to do because they can no longer distinguish between just and unjust, beautiful and ugly, or good and evil. The only sound that reaches them is a confused clamor that they have no way of organizing. Barbarous deeds are preceded by barbarity of spirit: the two mutually reinforce one another in an infinite hall of mirrors. The political result has become all too obvious. The idea that the actions of a few men can have consequences comparable to natural disasters or major epidemics is no longer understood as it was and as it should continue to be. And yet such men and such actions continue to define the greatness of politics; therefore, politics cannot be rehabilitated without a serious consideration of ethics. In the absence of a rehabilitated politics, moreover, we will have neither the strength to avert the ordeals the present century has in store for us, nor, more important, the courage to confront them if we have the misfortune of being unable to avoid them. That is the subject of this book.

In its capacity for horrors, history has never lacked imagination. And the perverse inventiveness displayed by recent events is so dark that it sorely tests our inner strength. Bringing politics closer to ethics is a duty not only to the living but also to the dead. Do we need to be reminded of that by a Chinese photographer who describes an execution that took place near Harbin in 1968?

On April 5, 1968, during the Qing Ming Festival, I photographed the execution of seven men and one woman. . . . The eight condemned people were made to climb two by two onto the backs of trucks and they were driven through the town and into the countryside northwest of Harbin. There they were lined up with their hands tied behind their backs inside the walls of the desolate cemetery of Huang Shan, and they were forced to kneel. They were all killed with a

bullet to the back of the head. No one asked me to take close-ups of their bodies, but I did it on my own. . . . When I enlarged the photos of the people who had been executed, in the dim red light of the dark room, I spoke to them in a quiet voice. I said to them: 'If your souls are haunted, I beg you not to haunt me too. I am simply trying to help you. I took pictures of you because I wanted to immortalize History . . . I want people to know how you were scorned.'²⁵