

A History of Idiocy

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I AM FURIOUS. And I have good reason to be furious. I was going to write an article about a subject I have been thinking about for a long time.

This week I opened the New York Times and lo, my yet unwritten article appeared on its opinion pages in full, argument after argument.

How come? I have only one explanation: the author—I have forgotten the name—has stolen the ideas from my head by some magical means, which surely must be branded as criminal. A person once tried to kill me for doing the same thing to him.

So I have decided to write this article in spite of everything.

THE SUBJECT is idiocy. Particularly, the role of idiocy in history.

The older I get, the more convinced I am that sheer stupidity plays a major role in the history of nations.

Great Thinkers, compared to whom I am a mere intellectual dwarf, have pursued other factors to explain what has turned history into a mess. Karl Marx blamed the economy. The economy has directed humankind from its earliest beginnings.

Others blame God. Religion has caused awful wars, and still does. Look at the Crusades, which for almost two hundred years raged in my country. Look at the 30-year War which devastated Germany. No end in sight.

Some accuse Race. Whites against Red Indians. Aryans against Untermenschen. Nazis against Jews. Terrible.

Or geopolitics. The White Man's Burden. The Drang nach-Osten.

For many generations, Great Thinkers have been searching for some deep explanation for war. There must be such an explanation. After all, terrible historical events cannot just happen. There must be something profound, something sinister, which is causing all this untold misery. Something that has accompanied the human race from its very beginnings, and that still directs our destiny.

I HAVE adopted most of these theories in my time. Many of them impressed me very much. Great thinkers. Deep thoughts. I have read many thick volumes. But in the end, they left me unsatisfied.

In the end it hit me. There is indeed one factor common

to all these historical events: foolishness.

I know that this sounds incredible. Foolishness? All these thousands of wars? All these hundreds of millions of casualties? All these emperors, kings, statesmen, strategists? All fools?

Recently I was asked for an example. "Show me how it works," an incredulous listener demanded.

I mentioned the outbreak of World War I, an event that changed the face of Europe and the world forever, and which ended just five years before I was born. My earliest childhood was spent in the shadow of this cataclysm.

It happened like this:

An Austrian archduke was killed in the town of Sarajevo by a Serbian anarchist. It happened almost by accident: the planned attempt failed, but later the terrorist happened upon the duke and killed him.

So what? The duke was a quite unimportant person. Thousands of such acts have happened before and since. But this time the Austrian statesmen thought that this was a good opportunity to teach the Serbs a lesson. It took the form of an ultimatum.

No big deal. Such things happen all the time. But the powerful Russian empire was allied with Serbia, so the Czar issued a warning: he ordered the mobilization of his army, just to make his point.

In Germany, all the red lights went on. Germany is situated in the middle of Europe and has no impregnable natural borders, no oceans, no high mountains. It was trapped between two great military powers, Russia and France. For years the German generals had been pondering how to save the Fatherland if attacked from the two sides simultaneously.

A master-plan evolved. Russia was a huge country, and it would take several weeks to mobilize the Russian army. These weeks must be used to smash France, turn the army around and stop the Russians.

It was a brilliant plan, worked out to the finest detail by brilliant military minds. But the German army was stopped at the gates of Paris. The British intervened to help France. The result was a static war of four long years, where nothing really happened except that millions upon millions of human beings were slaughtered or maimed.

In the end a peace was made, a peace so stupid that

it virtually made a Second World War inevitable. This broke out a mere 21 years later, with even larger numbers of casualties.

MANY BOOKS have been written about “July 1914”, the crucial month in which World War I became inevitable.

How many people were involved in decision-making in Europe? How many emperors, kings, ministers, parliamentarians, generals; not to mention academicians, journalists, poets and what not?

Were they all stupid? Were they all blind to what was happening in their countries and throughout their continent?

Impossible, one is tempted to cry out. Many of them were highly competent, intelligent people, people versed in history. They knew everything about the earlier wars that had ravaged Europe throughout the centuries.

Yet there you are. All these people played their part in causing the most terrible war (up to then) in the annals of history. An act of sheer idiocy.

The human mind cannot accept such a truth. There must be other reasons. Profound reasons. So they wrote innumerable books explaining why this was logical, why it had to happen, what were the “underlying” causes.

Most of these theories are certainly plausible. But compared to the effects, they are puny. Millions of human beings marched out to be slaughtered, singing and almost dancing, trusting their emperor, king, president, commander-in-chief. Never to return.

Could all these leaders be idiots? They certainly could. And were.

I DON'T need the examples of the thousands of foreign wars and conflicts, because I live in the middle of one right now.

Never mind how it came about, the present situation is that in the land that used to be called Palestine there live

two peoples of different origin, culture, history, religion, language, standard of living and much more. They are now of more or less equal size.

Between these two peoples, a conflict has now been going on for more than a century.

In theory, there are only two reasonable solutions: either the two peoples shall live together as equal citizens in one state, or they shall live side by side in two states.

The third possibility is no solution—eternal conflict, eternal war.

This is so obvious, so simple, that denying it is sheer idiocy.

Living together in one state sounds logical, but is not. It is a recipe for constant conflict and internal war. So there remains only what is called “two states for two peoples”.

When I pointed this out, right after the 1948 war, the war in which Israel was founded, I was more or less alone. Now this is a world-wide consensus, everywhere except in Israel.

What is the alternative? There is none. Just going on with the present situation: a colonial state in which 7 million Israeli Jews oppress 7 million Palestinian Arabs. Logic says that this is a situation that cannot go on forever. Sooner or later it will break down.

So what do our leaders say? Nothing. They pretend to be oblivious to this truth.

At the top of the pyramid we have a leader who looks intelligent, who speaks well, who seems competent. In fact, Binyamin Netanyahu is a mediocre politician, without vision, without depth. He does not even pretend that he has another solution. Nor do his colleagues and possible heirs.

So what is this? I am sorry to have to say it, but there is no other definition than the rule of idiocy.