



GALL

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 20TH CENTURY

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"Man is born, suffers and dies," is the legendary crystallization of Egypt's long ancient history, and might elliptically be the essential story of humanity. The German Count Gottlieb von Haesler enlarged the thought toward the end of the 19th century when he said, unconsciously anticipating the World Wars of the 20th century, "It is necessary that our civilization build its temple on mountains of corpses, on an ocean of tears, and on the death cries of men without number."

The most significant fact about the 20th Century is its "mountains of corpses" laid out at civilization's temple as the purpose or outcome of its greatest scientific and technological creations. At the very heart of the temple are the death camps whose names will most likely cause a shudder up through the centuries. Simultaneously, the purpose of splitting the atom to obliterate large numbers of the human species might cause future humanity to regard its 20th Century ancestors at least as barbarously as we think our cave dwelling forebears. "It is so stupid of modern civilization to give up believing in the Devil when s/he is the only explanation for it." (Ronald L. Knox)

The Millennium humanity now penetrates might be more realistically dated back to the middle of the 20th Century, in the summer of 1945 on the aptly named 'Day of Trinity' when the first humanly inspired nuclear explosion converted a section of desert into glass. The *Mushroom Cloud* is the true successor of the *Cross* as the world's calendrical icon — And the Millennium, rather than the third of a parochial chronology that dogmatically dates history bicamerally (BC & AD), might more realistically be counted as the 100th Millennium for *Homo sapiens (sapiens)*.

Boiling a century to the bone might be as easy as an X-ray as it recedes into a remote past, but when the *ante Christum* odometer has just flicked over to a new century as well as a new millennium (despite the denials of 20th Century retentives), the bone bare facts are superimposed with flesh, muscle and fat of varying colors, textures and striations. Events and personalities that occupied the 20th Century's attention, whether by inspiration or anxiety, or as commercially fabricated celebrities or *divertissements*, will predictably diminish to mere footnotes or be forgotten altogether. Perhaps the only names that remain in future cognition will be as symbols of stark simplicities — such as Adolf Hitler the satan of the century's darkness; Mohandas Gandhi its light. (Al Capone might rival Jesse James as the most famous American.) And Albert Einstein will surely be first among history's immortals.

A century encompasses billions of human beings — leaving out a trillion other living organisms (simple or complex), several of which humanity has more rapidly made extinct or endangered the past hundred years than at any time earlier; but everything about the past century was accelerated as well as the human birthrate and population sprawl that seem to have no end in sight — until humanity overflows the shell and neighboring subterranean spaces of its little egg with little more left than wiggle room.

The 20th Century had large grand themes as centuries tend to do (generally in retrospect). The fabric of these larger themes were interwoven from billions of diverse threads, underlying themes that dissolved into everybody moving around at random with no apparent distinguishable theme as they bumped everywhere into each other. It seemed as though grand themes were illusions, just billions of ordinary persons doing individually what they wished or felt obliged to do without patterns large enough to frame; swarming like protozoa in a drop of water.

The passing decades of the 20th Century appeared to take on their own colors and fabric; usually about halfway through, each decade was identified with an individual style and subsequently labeled: "The Jazz Age" for the 1920s for example — or the World War 2 years of the 1940s: the 'Great Depression' 1930s; the "Casino '80s". Yet these were only contrived popular affectations and reflected surface perturbations. For most of humanity the weather cycles of their lives were from other rhythms and pulses having more to do with genetics and familial heritages than to external or superficial delights and irritations — although wars, famines, epidemics and at least one Great Depression imposed conflicts and accelerating changes upon the world's populations that were caused as much by rapidly evolving technology as by the perpetual cupidity of politics.

The 20th Century magnified political struggles over ideologies and doctrines formulated in the 18th and 19th Centuries, primarily capitalism and communism, in their modern forms evolved from ancient concepts and practices (it was said that communism is fear mixed with greed and that capitalism

is exactly the opposite), but also the modern creed of fascism (Nazism its most vile example) which intermingled overtly or subjectively with other tenets and dogmas. As with religious theolitics, none of these ideolitical rivals could cooperate for long; instead they fiercely competed at extermination of each by each, and in consequence inflicted immense woe upon the world.

More millions were murdered, executed or annihilated for political reasons in the 20th Century than were killed in the World Wars.

20th Century warfare was on a scale so colossal that all other wars combined do not equal those fought in the past century. Yet as impossibly enormous as the wars were, involving hundreds of millions in the two World Wars (masses of soldiers living and dying like rats in trenches for years on the Western Front in World War 1; the 'Holocaust' in which millions were murdered in death camps in World War 2), each war broke down to humans fighting and dying on a minuscule scale — individual soldiers and civilians generally oblivious to wars' large purposes or patterns but concerned primarily with their own chances of survival; a family cowering in a shelter under a city ravaged by bombs dropped from fleets of airplanes piloted by determined frightened crews fighting off winged defenders whose rage and terror matched their enemy, everywhere in sky and ground death and desolation.

Humanity could consider itself fortunate that the war feared and thought inevitable the last half of the century did not occur, never heating beyond a 'Cold War' despite its huge thermonuclear world destroying potential.

World War 1 lost more soldiers to disease as a result of being massed together in unsanitary conditions than to guns — as in virtually every previous war but on an unprecedented scale due to the numbers of men involved — which in turn might have been a major source for the influenza epidemic of 1918-20 that killed perhaps as many as 100 million.

Although smallpox was eradicated in the 20th Century as humanity's major scourge outside its predilection for epic internecine violence, other plagues endangered world health, predominantly AIDS in the last two decades of the century. AIDS spread from Africa, which still accounts for 70% of the victims, and has orphaned nearly 11 million children, most in sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet while 3rd World people died almost as rapidly as they were born because of poverty, wars, famine and generally poor health, men and women in the industrial nations had their lives significantly lengthened by medical and health advances in the 20th Century. (These healthier billions consumed vastly more amounts of dwindling resources while simultaneously polluting air, land and water with the effluents of their affluence.)

The 20th Century closed with approximately 6 billion living human beings — relatively three times as many people as at the beginning of World War 1 — despite "more human beings...killed or allowed to die than any other time in history" (Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*). An estimation of 'Megadeaths' of the past century is almost 200 million (nearly 60 million in World War 2) — more than 1 in 10 of the total world population in 1900. Yet at the end of the century more babies were born each day than dead left to make room for them, ever less space to provide them every day; a baby was claimed to be born every 3 minutes in just the USA.

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