

# The Return of Gulliver: Some Reflections on Terror and Identity

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**B**ig ideologies die hard; to many people they still sound extremely attractive because, as such people think and feel, big ideology protects them from social disorder and uncertainty in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> At the bottom of any big ideology lies in fact a simple idea: the present state of affairs is bad, there are too many individuals who suffer. In order to give up sufferings, the present state of affairs must be radically changed. As an ultimate result, big ideology promises happy life to all who will follow it; those who will not are profoundly misguided.

Two *a priori* assumptions condition the existence of a big ideology: first, if not to join it now, history will move on the wrong track; second, it expresses the true will of the majority even if this majority is not yet conscious of the fact. Both assumptions are difficult to disprove; both offer a consistent model of behavior that may seem seductive especially to those who seek the exit from despair. Such was the case of the Weimar Republic which came into being basically as an outcome of what Max Weber called “the domestic political consequences of the disillusionment”<sup>2</sup> that had swept through millions in 1914. Having discovered the ineluctability of class struggle, German workers came back brought from the trenches the hatred of the old order. The sacrifices of the war should be paid, they hoped, by fundamental social changes. Germany was defeated; worse, it was knelt down by the Versailles Treaty came into force on 10 January 1920. It had affected the mass mood to the point where even the views of the most loyal citizens were contaminated. Another important event took place in 1914 when Kaiser

Wilhelm II proclaimed *Burgfrieden* or domestic truce calling for all political parties, including the marginalized Social Democrats, to set up a fresh climate in the country. Truly, Kaiser's call-up gave the way to the concentration of so contrasting political forces that the soon coming of a big ideology seemed to be predestinated.

A similar situation happened in the post-Gorbachev Russia when the collapse of the communist idea was compensated by the diversity of political parties and the unprecedented freedom of the press. During the Yeltzin era the climate has lasted more or less untouched; politics in the country became a "family business," namely the Yeltzin family business (composed from a juggernaut of politicians and tycoons bounded by *qui pro quo* interests). The current Putin epoch, bearing resemblance to the Restoration in England when Charles II welcomed national spirits to mature, is aimed at the big idea again coercing acquiescence from tycoons and the press. The first are forced to calm down or go into exile; the second is put under a more severe control. Power, accumulated within the family, will be channeled into those institutions that can properly work on a new ideology,<sup>3</sup> the way that Putin conducts his restoration consists in putting strong stints upon the political ambitions of the super-rich.

As to the Weimar Germany, the big ideology born inside it owes its birth to the appeal for national self-identification. The government attempts to revamp the country doomed to failure; finally, no significant politician with liberal views could be safe at the time. Matthias Erzberger was assassinated in 1921 for the crime of signing the armistice agreement in 1918; Walter Rathenau, murdered in 1922,<sup>4</sup> was called "a Jewish traitor" for a signatory of the Rapallo with the Soviets. No idea without nationalistic rhetoric could really succeed in attracting masses; since 1920 the left movements started being marginalized rapidly. German Communists, who were making themselves after the Bolsheviks, wished an immediate Lenin-like takeover, however without any notable success. The word "völkisch"<sup>5</sup> became the linchpin of the right movement, no matter what differences the right movement had in tactics. Right leaders began leaving underground establishing their political organizations and parties: the most notorious is the German Workers' Party (subsequently the NSDAP) run by the railway worker Anton Drexler. This man was one of the first to appreciate Hitler's oratorical gift and gave him the chance.<sup>6</sup> By 1923 the epoch of lonely terrorists belonging to the underground political sects and hunting the condemned leaders came to the end. Since then terror against enemies was no longer the business of extremist groups but the way the Germans have seen to tie up national sentiment with the big idea.

### Fighting With the Chaos: from Grozny to Colombo

Russia in the Yeltzin era has much in common with the Weimar Republic. If the latter marked the age of classical modernism when in politics, like in other arts, tools became more important than aims; Russia of this period entered the epoch of classical postmodernism when tools filled the vacuum left after the communist idea collapsed. Soon after that, many people in Russia got a feeling that all footings they had in former life are broken; old ideals turned out to be false almost overnight; nobody really knew the way to go; money became an indisputable value, practical and symbolical at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Important large-scale outcome of the collapse was, for Russians, to discover strangeness in themselves, a feeling that pushed the nation to seek for another identity. Capitalism and free market along with unlimited freedom of the press were the fundamentals of the epoch.

It is likely, I think, that this strangeness caused partly those political troubles that last until today. They are territorial and identical; all the rest is secondary. If the former empire ceased to exist, if there is no *primus inter pares* nation that leads all the others, than, consequently, there is no territory which may unite different nations and different histories into one homogeneous whole. The Chechnya case is the best illustration of what happened to the "big nation" and "small nation," earlier tied up by the same Soviet identity. The roots of the conflict lie in two dilemmas: one is Russian after the empire crashed, the second is Chechen. One is how to live on the large territory without big ideology, the second is how to live on the small territory within the big ideology. Historically, both dilemmas have been solving through the wars.

Let us look at it cursorily. Differences in the social structure of both societies are crucial. Russian society, even in the Soviet period, was more or less like any other Western society that has always had its aristocracy, classes and, as Marx would say, a ruling ideology. Chechens had never known aristocracy; traditionally, they had two types of person (it even can hardly be called classes) – the *uzden*, a free man, and the *lai*, a slave who worked on the land and was deprived of any civil rights. Chief decisions were normally taken by the elders of a village during their reunion,<sup>8</sup> the system having some similarity with the Greek polis<sup>9</sup> (in *Politics* VII 1326b Aristotle says that a state composed of too many citizens will not be the true polis). The Chechen society is a network of small communities or clans (*teips*) which are tightly interwoven one with another; everyone belongs to a particular village and clan. Marriage is very important since it makes two clans interact on the blood principle. *Teip* links the Chechen to his or her natal place, then to that of wife or husband, and by this to the whole people. Brotherhood is the spiritual ground for the nation; nobody will

ever deviate its rules if the person does not want to be expelled from it or even put to death. This is not just about Chechens but all the peoples of mountain who speak of themselves in terms of religious brotherhood. The Afghan mujahideen, having struggled against the Soviet army for almost a decade, did not change their usual way of thought, nor their psychological stability showed any signs of corruption. Robert Kaplan wrote about a mujahid warrior who lost the eye and the foot but regretted nothing.

His body belongs to Allah, he said; so there is nothing to complain.<sup>10</sup> The feature that distinguishes the mujahideen from other Islamic movements, including the Chechen, is that they have no ideology or a true leader like Arafat in Palestine or Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. In other words, the mujahideen don't set up political goals because it is not clear for them to what such goals might serve.

Well, come back to Chechnya. Its history, like many other histories of small countries near a big neighbor, was turbulent. In 1816 a hero of Napoleonic Wars, Alexei Yermolov was appointed commander-in-chief of the Caucasus. Hungry for power, this man liked to say that his word must be for the natives (the peoples of the Caucasus) more inevitable than death. The Chechens for him were certainly an inferior race, all of them were treacherous, villains, robbers whose best destiny is to blindly obey the master.<sup>11</sup> In 1825-26 Yermolov set about war companies against the Chechens burning villages and punishing the rebellious. For him, as the British historian John Baddeley points out, to conquer the region "was a matter of a few short years at most."<sup>12</sup> The illusion disappeared when Imam Shamil held sway over the Islamic movement (*muridism*) and led resistance to the Russians for more than quarter a century (Shamil rests a mythic figure in Chechen history equal, perhaps, to Muhammad Ali of Macedonia). His final surrender took place in 1859, at the time he was famous as a national leader fighting the tsarist imperial policy; even Marx called him a democrat encouraging other debased peoples to follow his way. The Bolsheviks promised autonomy and freedom to construe a legal system based on the *sharī'ah* principle. More, when in 1920 the Soviet invasion on the Chechen territory brought about the Said Bek mutiny, Stalin, then the People Commissar on Nationalities, proclaimed an amnesty for participants if they recognize the Soviet power. The Autonomous Republic, conflated from *sharī'ah* constitutional laws and Soviet rhetoric, existed five years; the Bolshevik promise did not last more. In the middle of World War II, in February 1943, the Politburo mooted the idea of mass deportation of Chechens and Ingush to Kazakhstan as a punishment for their war crimes, as it was said. Mass deportation was at the time an usual practice.<sup>13</sup> Germans from the Volga and Ukraine were sent to Siberia; the small Karachais people, lived in the mountainous region

of Elbrus were expelled in the same 1943; Kalmyks, the Crimean Tatars, Muslim Turks, not to mention others, were uprooted from their natal places before and immediately after the war ended. The pivotal 1991 marked the Chechens' turn to the national identification, again. At the Congress held on 23-25 November Chechnya has been named a sovereign state; it stood on the eve of revolution. Its outburst happened when Jokhar Dudaev, elected in November 1990 Chairman of the Chechen National Congress and President in 1991, issued his first decree declaring Chechnya as an independent state.

Tellingly, before these last events Dudaev was not a nationalist, nor was he a person who has dreamed to requite the Soviet power for its wrongs; his military career was highly successful, in 1990 he held a rank of a major-general of the Soviet Army. A devoted nationalist and separatist Dudaev seems to become not earlier than the Congress took place when he has spoken of the greatest honor for the true Chechen to defend his motherland. The man who launched the Chechen rebellion against the empire was an all-product of the empire, who in 1969 married a daughter of his superior and spoke Russian as his mother tongue. This is a paradox of any big idea – political idea – that the individuals who once decided to fight it were previously its devotees. Dudaev's solution to the second dilemma formulated above was to get rid of such dilemma at all. Precisely, he tried to liberate the small territory from the big ideology by opposing the identity of the people (Brzezinski) and the soil to the latter. The move is correct if to remember that the deportation syndrome is still alive almost in every Chechen family. However, it was not all he did. He went further stating that the nation has been suffering for three hundreds years and all this time Chechens with more or less success are conducting resistance to Russians.<sup>14</sup> He came with the idea that he learned from the big ideology of communism: sufferings, this is what makes people feel unhappy and help unite them.

The Sri Lankan Civil War is another example of a long ethnic conflict or a *discrete war*, as we prefer to call it, within one country. On 23 July 1983, the organization known as *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE, or, simply, the Tamil Tigers) undertook an insurgency against the government, its aim was to create an independent Tamil state named "Tamil Eelam" (*tamiḷ īlam*)<sup>15</sup> in the North and the East of the island. This discrete war lasted twenty six years (and cost about 100,000 lives), until May 2009 when the Sri Lankan military forces finally defeated the Tamil Tigers and brought the conflict to an end. Although the way the Tigers had conducted their struggle was named "terrorist" by thirty two countries, including the US and the majority of European states, the Sri Lankan militaries were often accused of human rights abuses, impunity for severe human rights violation, and the like. The

got nothing to oppose except his emotional outbursts. The time was complex, the Suez Canal crisis finally exploded into open warfare, in October 1956. France and Israel negotiated with England to invade Egypt and minimize it in size. As a result, Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, killed several hundreds fedayeen, England and France occupied cities along the Canal. When Nasser, one year before these events, put the political interests of his country at first place, forcing guerilla enthusiasts to calm down, he has definitely kept in mind a more global project than to cover his Palestinian protégées.

Any big ideology has not only its political masters but also the intellectual gurus; Arab nationalism is not an exception. Michel Aflaq was the man who played the role. Born in Damascus in 1910, he was a Greek Orthodox Christian spent some three years (1928–1930) studying philosophy at the Sorbonne. List of his readings included Marx, Nietzsche, Lenin, Mazzini, and German proto-Nazi thinkers, as Moeller van den Bruck and Houston Chamberlain,<sup>17</sup> whose ideas influenced him much. After his return from France Aflaq is active in Arab student politics with his countryman Salah Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. Young people hailed Hitler and the rise of the Nazi party as well as they took the Bolsheviks and their leader as the most suitable example for the Arab case. Nevertheless, intellectually Aflaq seemed to be under the spell of the Germans more than under somebody else's influence. In 1940 in Damascus he grounded an initially small society called *the Movement of Arab Renaissance* that in 1947 turned into the Ba'ath party (the word *ba'ath* means “renaissance, resurrection” in Arabic). A decade later the Ba'ath party had grown into a leading force in the political life of Syria, Aflaq was recognized as a chief ideologist of Arab national renaissance. An eclectic doctrine, mostly composed from German nationalism, some Nazi motives and European socialist teachings, it fell on the right place and at the right time. The Arabs, whose more or less active resistance to Western presence on their territory was based on religious principles, needed a consistent political theory capable to show the future route.

“Unity, Freedom, Socialism” were the main points to which Aflaq gave much weight in his expositions. If to leave aside for a moment the fact that among Aflaq's devoted disciples was Saddam Hussein who used the ideology to shape from Iraq a sort of extreme secular state, Aflaq has never considered his ideas as the open call for terror against the infidels. Instead, he stressed Arab superiority over other cultures and its natural and ideal harmony with the divine law (*Shari'at Allāh*) of the world order. Islamic universe, grounded on the *Shari'a* model of society, achieved all that others nations only wished to achieve. So, the Arabs don't need Western creatures such as the state or

technology. The Algerian theorist Rashid Boudjedra, giving support to Aflaq, says that Islam is “incommensurable with the modern state”<sup>18</sup> and therefore any attempt to jam Islam in the limits of the state will necessarily fail.

Again, at the golden age of Arab nationalist movement, in its political form (Nasser) and in the cultural one (Aflaq) large-scale terror was not (and could not) the key weapon used against the other. Neither Arab state leaders, nor the thinkers wished to terrorize the whole civilisation to reach their target. Why? Because it was incompatible with the very idea of Islam as an authentic spiritual system aiming at keeping the Arab highest values in purity, untouched by the means the Westerners have always put at work on their territories fighting each other throughout history. It was a romantic period on the way the Arabs have been seeking for their identity in the world. Since last two decades the vision of terror was radically changed; terror or Jihad was transfigured in a Western type of big ideology when it sets up the global tasks and uses newest technological achievements. The latest example: the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (*ad-Dawlah l-Islāmiyyah*), a quasi-state organization founded in 2006 which considers itself as a contemporary caliphate. It claims the religious authority over the neighbouring Muslim regions including Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon among others. The Islamic State represents in fact the same kind of political psychosis as the wishes of the old Stalinists to restore the Soviet *belle époque*. This semi-physical, semi-symbolical Islamic network has neither fixed territories nor it grants citizenship; no country ever recognized its legitimacy, whence the idea of ‘caliphate’. It has about 55,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq who claimed responsibility for attacks against civilians. Although its al-Qaeda origins are quite obvious, despite the ideological clashes with the latter, the Islamic State's initial goal was to establish a caliphate rule over the Sunni regions of Iraq, but after its involvement in the Syrian Civil war, it included the Sunni population of Syria as well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas points to the inutility of big ideologies (*totale Ideologie*) such as communism in the technological era. They will be removed by new communicative relationships grounded in professional and corporative networks, he thinks. Habermas develops this idea mainly in his two books: Habermas, 1968 and 1982. I disagree with him on this point, and I will argue why in this paper. Less romantic is Slavoj Žižek who writes that the person within totalitarian ideology needs the lie it tells him or her. Cf. Žižek, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Weber, *Zur Frage des Friedensschlusses*, in Weber, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> The Moscow-based journalist and scholar Yevgenia Albats criticizes the Russian President for his unwillingness (or impotence) to give the state support to the small

and middle business which could have contributed much to render democracy in Russia stable. "Instead, she writes, Putin "<...> has brought Russian-style order without any law," (*Washington Post*, 24 Sept.) that signifies a turn to former bureaucratic rule with corruption at any level of society. A quite pessimistic view, however, it is not totally unlikely, if a tendency to smother basic freedoms has developed.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *The Revolt of the Masses*, published in 1932, Jose Ortega y Gasset meditates on the this murder. His conclusion is that an intellectual like Rathenau, no matter how good or bad he is, could not remain on the German political scene because he had nothing to saturate the political appetite of the masses. Cf. Ortega y Gasset, 1983. I think there was also another reason: Rathenau was killed by the members of a terrorist group shared the extreme chauvinistic ideas, at least one of them, Erwin Kern, was a member of the *Freikorps* out of which Ernest Röhm will later shape his notorious SA. For details see Waite, 1952. Rathenau was an ideal target for terrorists to demonstrate their principles of self-identification.

<sup>5</sup> It was a concept invented in the nationalistic circles of Germany long before the classical modernity. Its clear appearance may be dated by the mid of the XVIII century when K. Jahn established sportive camps in the forests where he had taught the youth the idea of one blood and one soil. In the second half of the XIX century *völkisch* theories were popular in Austria, it resulted in the Pangermanism of G. Schönerer (tellingly, the intellectuals who stood behind the movement were such murky gurus as Hugo von List and Franz Liebenfels preoccupied with the idea of Aryan purity). In the pre-Hitler Germany the *völkisch* ideology and socialism gained its numerous followers after the World War I; it was never strong as at that time. George Strasser, who might have been an alternative to Hitler and whose political views were much more socialist than nationalist, repeated that to separate the essence of the social from the concept of nation is to ignore the basic fact that it is the people who actually compose the body of a nation itself.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Drexler, 1919. As it usually happens, after Hitler has grown in a quite noticeable figure, Drexler changed his impressions about him imposing on Hitler responsibility for schism in the party. Interestingly, in *My Life* Leo Trotsky addresses many similar accusations to Stalin who was, in Trotsky's mind, the traitor of revolution.

<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is new for the country whose cultural paradigm has never given much weight to the money. From this point of view, communism with its disparaging attitude to personal wealth seems to be well encoded in Russian mental history. Just to mention Fedor Dostoevsky's novels where money and wealth bring about sufferings and unhappiness. Cf. also Pipes, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> The French anthropologist Ernest Chantre (1843-1924), who conducted his fieldwork among the Chechens in the XIXth century, noted that the Chechens formed several separate communities placed under the rule of a popular assembly. Today they live as people unaware of class distinctions. They are very different from the Circassians whose gentry occupies a very high place. Cf. Chantre, 1885-1887.

<sup>9</sup> Moses Finley notes that: "[polis] was people acting in concert, and therefore they must be able to assemble and deal with problems face to face." Cf. Finley, 1991, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> R. D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God*, (New York, Vintage Books: 1990), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Jews have been given similar definitions by the Nazi propaganda, especially in such issues as *Der Stürmer* headed by Julius Streicher. Obviously, the idea of an inferior nation was known to all big ideologies based on the principle of one privileged nation (for the cosmopolite Bolsheviks the inferior were the capitalists). For more details: Taguieff, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Baddeley, 1908, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gall, Waal, 1997, p. 37 and *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> The word is derived from the ancient Tamil name *īlam* (also spelled *iḷham* that corresponds to the Tamil classical pronunciation) denoting Sri Lanka. The old Tamil lexicons, such as *Thivākaram*, *Pingkalam*, and *Chodāmani*, mention the *īlam* as "gold, pearl." Similarly, the word *Eelavar* (*īlavar*) is associated with the caste of toddy tapers living in the South of Kerala (India). Cf. for details Sitampalam, 2008; Stokke, Ryntveit, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> The idea of proletariat, which Marx formulated at the early stage of his philosophical development, was never significantly changed: " <...> total loss of humanity [by proletariat] ... can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity... When the proletariat announces the dissolution of the hitherto existing order of things, it merely announces the secret of its own existence because it is the effective dissolution of this order..." Cf. Marx, 1964, p. 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> The eminent economist and political thinker van den Bruck wrote in his *Das dritte Reich* (Berlin, 1888) where he invented the notion. The key book of Chamberlain, got deep appreciation in Hitler (some say it was Hitler's bedside book), was called *Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Foundations of the XIXth century) published in 1899 in Berlin. For further details Lane, Rupp, 1978.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Shayegan, 1989, p. 42.

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# India and the Virtuous Indian in Dante

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## Introduction

Whereas in his *Divine Comedy*, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) strove to embrace orthodoxy even as he was castigating such members of the clergy (even popes) he considered sinful, the fact deserves attention that when he cleverly raises an objection concerning the virtuous yet unbaptised, and how it could be fair that they would be denied spiritual salvation, he does so by providing as an example the virtuous Indian who does not know Christianity, or at any rate has not adopted it. Dante the author avoids having Dante the character voice that objection; rather, he has a mystical being in Heaven read his mind, expound the problem, and provide an answer that makes an important concession. What did Dante know about India, on the evidence of his writings? The present study is concerned with these matters.

## Geography in Gabrieli's *Dante e l'Oriente*

References to India in Dante's writings, and in the *Divine Comedy* in particular, do sporadically occur.<sup>1</sup> We are going to quote a relevant passage from Giuseppe Gabrieli's book *Dante e l'Oriente* (1921a). Cf. Gabrieli (1921b). Gabrieli had previously published ([1919] 1920) *Intorno alle fonti orientali della Divina Commedia* [*Concerning the Oriental Sources of the Divine Comedy*], and in the controversy about whether Islamic sources had influenced the *Divine Comedy*, he sided with those generally favourable to that hypothesis, but he was opposed to how Asín Palacios in particular had dealt with the matter.<sup>2</sup>