

The True Believer
Eric Hoffer

Apropos at the time of the Arab spring uprisings

Hoffer wrote shortly after the fall of the fascists, the Nazis, and the Japanese Empire. The Soviet Union was at its apogee, having just extended control over Eastern Europe and developed the atomic bomb.

It is amazing how much this self educated man expects his readers to know. He makes extensive references to biblical history, Roman and Greek history, and European and European philosophers from the time of the Enlightenment forward. Simply reading the books he cites in his footnotes would comprise a better liberal education than any American university offers today.

His work had good predictive power. He called the reasons for the demise of the Soviet Union – it grew soft from the inside. He draws a critical distinction among the phases in a revolution. Writers sew the seeds, preparing the intellectual environment for change. Fanatics, with a grand disregard for lives, history, or anything except their grand ideal, come to the fore when the moment is right and lead the great revolution. They are succeeded by practical men of action who implement, institutionalize, bureaucratized and enforce the new order.

This short diagnosis of the third Reich is that it might have survived if the fanatic who got it started, Adolf Hitler, had died during the 30s has been replaced by a practical man of action. He attributes the longevity of the Soviet Union to this kind of good fortune. Vladimir Lenin died, being replaced by the scheming Joseph Stalin who was practical, at least about holding onto power.

The questions of our day are rising populism among the Andean nations in South America, increasing discontent with the liberal regimes throughout Western Europe and a nativist desire to throw out the immigrants and give up on the Brussels experiment, and especially the Arab spring. A surprising phenomenon in the Arab spring is that we do not see charismatic leaders coming to the fore to take advantage of the chaos which has followed the fall of the long-standing regimes and dynasties in North Africa and the Middle East. Hoffer tells you what to look for – the characteristics of the emergent Trotsky or Lenin.

I recommend this highly to younger readers. It evokes a very protean era of American history, one in which I as a schoolboy was led to live in constant fear of the Red Menace, and then the ChiComs, and more or less inevitable annihilation by nuclear war. Hoffer saw his era clearly, and has penetrating insights on the nature of political man.