

# B O O K R E V I E W S

It must be difficult to find a book as uneven as this one, as unmistakably characterized by tensions of style and approach, as curiously unsatisfying even while it is greatly stimulating.

The polarities of *Fire in the Minds of Men* can be seen on its very surface. On the one hand, the book doggedly adheres to the canons of exact scholarship, forcing a conscientious reader to grapple with more than 140 pages of notes in small print and, on a number of occasions, relentlessly numbing him with more than he needs or wants to know. On the other hand, the author can be hell-bent on being relevant, apparently unpersuaded of the *intrinsic* fascination of his topic, correctly characterized by the subtitle as the "Origins of the Revolutionary Faith." For example, his style can change from the academically somber to the dubiously jazzy, as when he suddenly speculates on calling that faith "the amphetamine of the intellectuals"; or when he mars an excellent portrait of Lafayette by a singularly unilluminating comparison of the latter with Martin Luther King. And surely he caters unnecessarily to the trends of the times by concluding with an examination of the place of feminism in his history. The dubiousness of that maneuver becomes evident from the fact that the star of the chapter on "The Role of Women" is Rosa Luxemburg, whose unquestionable significance has nothing to do with her sex. Apparently, Billington had no clear principle of selection in mind when he wrote the book. As a result, it is a cross between an indispensable contribution to the study of modernity and a kind of Guinness Book of Revolutionary Records.

When so obviously significant a work as this manages to be both flashy and dull so often, the case calls for explanations. Perhaps the book's limitations are connected with the author's profession. He is a historian and sometimes seems to think one will know *why* something happened if only one knows "all about" what happened. Perhaps the problems are caused by the *kind* of history Billington has chosen to produce and the

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## FIRE IN THE MINDS OF MEN: ORIGINS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY FAITH

James H. Billington / Basic Books / \$25.00

Werner J. Dannhauser

focus he has attempted to preserve. He calls his book a "work of humanistic history: the record of what one man who is not a revolutionary found interesting and important about a number of his fellow human beings who were." That is both honest and disarming but fails to resolve the question whether the subject matter does not call for either a political history or a straightforward history of ideas. A political history need not be blind to what we call "culture." Thus, when Thucydides writes the funeral oration of Pericles he manages to convey a sense of the whole of Athenian life, and he can get away with writing a great book about the time of Socrates—without mentioning Socrates. What is more, a history of ideas such as Löwith's *From Hegel to Nietzsche* can be quite illuminating about what we loosely call "the real world." For instance, Löwith—and I do not mean to rank him with Thucydides—tells us nearly as much as Billington about the immense and increasing importance of

journalism in the nineteenth century.

Billington's book is primarily neither political nor intellectual. He attempts to tell the "story not of revolutions, but of revolutionaries" (italics his). As both the title and subtitle indicate, however, by their respective references to "minds" and "faith," he is more concerned with the thoughts, souls, and speeches of his characters than with their deeds; Marxist materialists would have to label, and perhaps to dismiss, him as an idealist historian.

Now, with all due respect to Marxists, this reviewer finds absolutely nothing wrong with "idealist" historians, but the trouble is that Billington sometimes fails on his own chosen ground. The shortcoming is most evident in his discussion of the French Revolution. In his predilection for discussing figures that seem (unjustly, maybe) minor, he leaves himself little room to treat Rousseau, who, after all, did more than anybody else in the eighteenth century to light a fire in the minds of men and instill a

revolutionary faith. Billington himself indicates as much by repeatedly, though in passing, noting the influence of Rousseau on the revolutionaries he describes. Many other examples of such imbalance might be cited, but one will probably suffice. Here is a book that grants no greater prominence to Hegel than to James Fazy, the man who, more or less, created a stable and bourgeois Switzerland.

Nevertheless, when one has finished *Fire in the Minds of Men*, noted all one's dissatisfaction with it, and even, as in the case of this reviewer, attempted to commit them to print, one is left—given a minimal sense of fairness—with a sense of having read a book that really matters: a sense not all that easy to come by these days.

In part, that is because Billington brings his amazing erudition to bear on a story we must all keep telling and retelling ourselves. It is, after all, a story on the outcome of which our very lives depend, and the understanding of which is a precondition for understanding ourselves. It is the story of history's march from 1789 to 1917.

The three talismanic words of the French Revolution are liberty, fraternity, and equality, but Billington suggests that devotion to liberty had already peaked in the American Revolution. The greatest effect of the French Revolution was a devotion to fraternity in the sense of a national community. The author never oversimplifies so as to make history seem perfectly linear and therefore is quite fair to egalitarians like Babeuf of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, nationalism inspired the greatest dedication during most of the nineteenth century, with Mazzini as its most representative figure and Garibaldi its most romantic hero.

It is, by the way, not the least of the merits of this book to stress the romantic (as opposed to rational) elements possessing (quite literally at times) more revolutionaries than would care to own up to the fact. The rich, though sometimes cumbersome, texture of this book abounds with examples of the influence of spiritualism, Pythagorean symbols, erotic mysteries and rites on revolutionaries and therefore on revolutions.

The failures of all the apparent or



real revolutions of 1848 signified the decline of the ideal of fraternity and the advent of the ideal of equality. Nationalists became less glamorous than socialists as the vanguard shifted from thinking of political revolutions to dreaming of social transfigurations. Billington is as true to the complexities of the growth of socialism as to those of nationalism. He finds nothing inevitable in the triumph of the Marxist version of socialism over that of Proudhon, whom he clearly favors. He also knows that a number of factors, especially the organizational triumphs of German Social Democracy and the violent activism of Russian revolutionaries, had to combine to enable Lenin, "the master builder," to triumph in 1917 and therewith to produce "the first major break in the basic unity of

European civilization since Luther." No summary can do justice to so vast a canvas as Billington has painted. Yet the virtues of this book do not depend solely on the author's assiduity in telling the story. Perhaps more important is the perspective he employs. In his focus on revolutionaries, he is dealing with men and women who are all too frequently the objects of left-wing hagiography or right-wing hysteria. It has been nearly a century since Marx died, for example, and we still do not possess an adequate understanding of the man and the "ism" he spawned. By steadfastly reserving his commitment to the spirit of rational inquiry, Billington helps us greatly in overcoming the partisanship that has beclouded our attempts to comprehend the revolutionary past. His book will be impossible to ignore with impunity. □

of China have become commonplace, such tidings from the academy, which surely finds them unpalatable, have been rare indeed. However unpleasant Rood's thesis may be, it offers the only satisfactory explanation of otherwise inexplicable Soviet activities. No less an authority than the Department of Defense's *United States Military Posture for FY 1980* admits that the Soviets' military capacity seems "far out of proportion to any rational calculation of their defense needs." The CIA's director of strategic research recently testified that the Soviet Union's military spending last year was about 50 percent greater than U.S. spending. When one considers that the Soviet economy (in rubles) is only 40 percent the size of the U.S. economy, the levels of Soviet military spending are staggering. Even more alarming are reports that the Soviets are on the verge of technological breakthroughs in ballistic missile defenses, primarily in the area of beam weapons. Recent reports also indicate that the Soviets have resumed testing of radar in an ABM mode, in clear violation of the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty. Soviet superiority in manpower, as well as in conventional and strategic weapons, continues to grow.

Rood provides a stark analysis of the erosion of the U.S. strategic position in recent years. Directing his attention to Cuba, the Mediterranean, and Europe, he argues that each

successive crisis in these theaters "has reduced the freedom of action of the West to wage effective war, while increasing the Soviet capacity to do so."

According to conventional wisdom, the United States "won" the Cuban Missile Crisis, averting war by forcing the Soviets to remove nuclear

**KINGDOMS OF THE BLIND**  
Harold W. Rood / Carolina Academic Press / \$14.95

Terry O'Rourke

*Kingdoms of the Blind* has a disturbing theme: the dangerous inclination of democratic peoples to dismiss the possibility of war. Professor Rood argues that the foreign policies and defensive strategies of the West are all too often based on the conviction that the constitutional rule of law which restricts the exercise of power and the application of force *within* a democracy also extends to activities *outside* its borders. This of course ignores the fact that the precepts of democracy and constitutional government are seldom found to work within the international community; totalitarian regimes—convinced of both the ubiquity of politics and the undeniable truth of their ideologies—have no reason to exercise restraint in compelling the weak to conform to these "truths." Simply put, democratic principles are not universally applicable. In its myopia, however, the West prefers to abandon prudence and caution for what Rood terms "optimistic inaction, adroit rhetoric, and strategic carelessness."

Rood's study deals with the West's  
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two major confrontations this century with totalitarian states: World War II and the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. The story of the West's tragic appeasement of Hitler is too well known to require discussion here. Of greater import is Rood's contention that U.S. policies toward the Soviets should not ignore the lessons taught by the folly of appeasement, not because history repeats itself, but because the imprudent behavior of democracies seems repetitious.

And the paramount lesson is that foreign and defense policy must be grounded in a realistic acceptance of the possibility of war. In Rood's words: "Military policy cannot be based on sentiments for peace however lofty those sentiments may seem. Military policy must fit the requirements for successful strategy and successful strategy does not derive from the notion that war is impossible."

Professor Rood believes that the Soviet Union is preparing for war, and that a successful United States policy must be based upon recognition of this reality. Although similar warnings from the People's Republic

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