

**Besançon, Alain. *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah*. Translated by Ralph C. Hancock and Nathaniel H. Hancock. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books. xxi plus 121 pp. \$28.00 hardcover.**

Alain Besançon, a prominent French historian, aims in this valuable and insightful book to address two related questions: why the evils of Nazism are better remembered and appreciated than the evils of communism, and whether the Nazi effort to destroy European Jewry can rightly be understood to occupy a unique place in what Churchill called “the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime.” He develops his argument through an introduction and five chapters, but the book can be divided into two distinct parts. In the first part, Besançon offers a comparative “historical analysis” of the “destruction” wrought by Nazism and communism, a threefold destruction of man in his physical, moral, and political natures. In the second part he considers these ideologies from a theological standpoint, a standpoint that he suggests is finally essential to a full understanding of their character and meaning.

The first part begins with a discussion of the physical destruction accomplished by the Nazis and communists, an overview of the various methods of mass slaughter that they employed. One might expect that—apart from the appalling character of the crimes involved—such an account would prove merely technical and hence somewhat uninteresting. Besançon, however, uses his description of such techniques to bring to light the differing characters of these related ideological evils. For example, he notes that communist regimes required a more extensive judicial and police apparatus precisely because the supposed enemies of such regimes were not, in contrast to the victims of the Nazis, identifiable in terms of their racial identity. One is left with the impression of equal but different experiences of radical evil: the horrifying certainty of who the Nazis would simply round up for deportation and annihilation, and the horrifying apparent randomness of who the communists would next claim to expose as secret ideological enemies through the use of extensive police spying and farcical judicial proceedings.

According to Besançon, behind the differing forms of moral destruction effected by Nazism and communism lurked a common feature: “ineptitude” (13). That is, while both ideologies claimed impressive intellectual pedigrees, and even scientific insight into the nature of things, they were in fact both governed by crude notions bearing no important relationship to reality, notions to which they tried to force reality to conform, with no success but with disastrous results.

I cannot here do justice to Besançon's comparative study of the Nazi and communist falsifications of the good. Let me merely note a single striking observation that does much to reveal the differences between the evils at work: Nazism was fundamentally aesthetic, while communism was moralistic. In Besançon's words, "The Nazi considered himself an artist; the communist, a virtuous man" (24). Of course, communism rejected the morality of nature, and of the Decalogue, no less completely than did Nazism. Nevertheless, Besançon suggests, Nazism's more forthright criminality limited its international appeal (since it could not be universalized) and its grip on the Germans themselves, who repented quickly after its defeat. In contrast, the surface moralism of communism, its claim to be advancing a universal human good, made its appeal more insidious and more seductive. This is one reason, and perhaps the deepest reason, for our civilization's greater preoccupation with the crimes of the Nazis than with the crimes of the communists.

Besançon concludes his historical analysis by considering the political destruction caused by both ideologies. This results from their utopianism. For Besançon, politics, properly understood, involves "equipping a people for the present by carefully managing the heritage of a past that is considered precious and living." But for Nazis and communists, "[w]edged between a mythical past and an ideal future, the present had no value." The political art was thus meaningless to them. The "recent past was the enemy," the "present did not count," and "everything was subjected to an eschatological future, to the final end" (43). This end, however, proved to be not a utopia but mere destruction. This end came more directly and quickly for the Nazis, because of their irrational aestheticism, their foolish trust in the inspired leadership of Hitler. It came less immediately for the communists, because they at least used rational means to achieve their ends. Nevertheless, Besançon adds, even for communism "destruction is necessarily the endgame. Construction is impossible because the goal is insane" (47).

A wise scholar knows the limits of his discipline, and so in the second part of the book Besançon moves beyond historical analysis, a step he presents as necessary in order to "do justice to the experience of human beings." He notes that the "great witnesses" of totalitarian evil in the twentieth century "have for the most part cried out to heaven," and he accordingly turns to theology as a source of deeper understanding (53). Such an inquiry seems impossible to avoid, given the open hostility to religion displayed by both ideologies, as well as their evident perverted religiosity: both claimed to offer a kind of secular salvation. More provocatively, and more controversially for Catholics, Besançon suggests that the character of both Nazi and communist evil challenges

the traditional theological view that evil is merely privation or the absence of good. Both systems, he contends, display a commitment to evil that seems to go beyond the tyrannies of the past. Aristotle held that tyranny, like other defective regimes, was characterized by the ruler's acting in his own interest rather than for the common good. As Besançon notes, however, the Nazi or communist ruler could not be understood in such traditional terms, because "he did not act with his personal good in mind" but rather appeared himself to be "tyrannized by something of a higher order" (55). This leads Besançon to one of his most powerful and provocative suggestions: He openly entertains, with utter seriousness, the possibility that such regimes were actually diabolical, under the influence of real demonic forces. Even, or especially, here Besançon displays more than ordinary insight. For he appeals to the diabolical to seek not only an explanation for the extent of the evil, but also for the often remarkable unimpressiveness of its perpetrators. He suggests that precisely because of the superiority of its nature, the "fallen angelic person could sustain the maximum degree of impersonality." This speculation, he contends, "lends credence to the notion of an impersonal person that one finds so universally in the literature of witnesses who were stifled by the dullness, meagerness, and banality of those who caused them to suffer and die" (57).

Besançon concludes, as his subtitle indicates, by suggesting that the Shoah must be understood as unique. To be sure, the mass murder of European Jews is not the only instance of massacre, which Besançon defines as the destruction of one people by another, or even of genocide, which he defines as such destruction when it is deliberately planned in advance and justified ideologically as advancing the good (ideologically conceived and falsified, of course). Nevertheless, the Nazi crime committed against the Jewish people is unique because of the unique status of its victims. Here again Besançon has recourse to theology, taking seriously the special relationship of the Jewish people to God, a relationship that is recognized even outside of Judaism: "A conviction of faith cannot be put aside: the Jewish people have suffered for the cause of God" (84). He draws his study to a close, however, by admitting that Christians and Jews do not understand this unique evil in the same manner. Christians may see the possibility of something redemptive in it, while Jews are less likely to do so. Hence the satisfaction of most of the former with the term holocaust, or sacrifice, while some Jewish thinkers prefer the more neutral Shoah, or catastrophe. Thus the uniqueness of the Shoah remains a "problem" that we cannot expect to solve so much as accept and understand (94).

Besançon writes about some of the most momentous events of the past century with breadth of knowledge and depth of insight. To these virtues he adds a humanity that is reflected in his approach to the moral judgments demanded by the subject matter. On the one hand, he does make such judgments and so avoids the distortions that would necessarily arise from the method of the merely scientific, value-neutral historian. On the other hand, he judges with a sobriety that equally avoids the tendentious moralism of the ideologue. Thus, for example, some Catholics might take issue with Besançon's criticisms of the posture towards Nazism adopted by some Churchmen, including Pius XII. Nevertheless, the open-minded reader will discern that Besançon's criticisms are those of an earnest and fair-minded man rather than of a hate-filled fanatic—the mode that, unfortunately, has been adopted by some authors dealing with these matters in recent years.

We owe a debt of gratitude to ISI for undertaking to publish this book in America and to Ralph and Nathaniel Hancock for translating it into English. For *A Century of Horrors* provides a much needed invitation to the fulfillment of a much-neglected duty: the duty to reflect on how evils of such unprecedented magnitude and character arose in the very heart of Western civilization. We seem not to have pondered these strange and terrible events with the proper seriousness. Our civilization roused itself to destroy Nazism and to contain communism until it was destroyed by its own ineptitude. Having succeeded, however, we seem to have returned with relief to a life of commerce, consumption, and entertainment. Thus, this book offers a correction to our indifference to exploring the meaning of the Nazi and communist catastrophes, an indifference that marks a superficiality almost as striking as the madness of such regimes themselves.

*Carson Holloway*  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*