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PARALLELS BETWEEN ISLAMIC
STATE AND THE THIRD REICH.
CURRENT SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract:

The totalitarian regimes of Islamic State and Nazi Germany have much in common. The alliance established by Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States to destroy the Third Reich in the last century can be an example for our leaders to deal with the global and common challenge posed by international jihadism and, especially, by Islamic State.

Keywords:

Islamic State, Third Reich, Syria, realpolitik.

CONSEQUENTIALISM AND *REALPOLITIK*

Consequentialism¹ is an ethical theory negatively seen nowadays. Its main idea is that the morality of actions depends on their results or consequences. Therefore, any action that has a positive consequence will be morally acceptable. Needless to say that, when taken to the extreme, this philosophy applied to the field of political action or even to everyday life can easily lead both to social and individual conducts, in which the desired end could justify the means used to achieve that end. This prompts wrongful and illegitimate actions that intend to obtain specific and favourable consequences for the person who carries out those actions.

However, from a more moderate perspective, when applied to the very complex realities of present international relations and to the current developing conflicts, this theory can enlighten the leaders of the international community on their quest for the greatest and most desirable peace and international stability or, most likely, for the lowest possible unrest and instability.

Therefore, just as somehow consequentialism is at the root of many of the laws that govern our societies—in their search for the greatest social good or, in its absence, for the lesser evil—the analysis of the consequences of the actions or omissions in international relations and crisis management is not only morally licit, but seems to be essential.

On the other hand, understanding the term *realpolitik* as the exercise of politics, and its geostrategic implementation as that which is ruled by interest and not by ideals, and which is translated into concrete actions with sought and, to the extent possible, predetermined outcomes, there is no doubt that this conception of politics is closely related to consequentialism.

The symbiosis between both concepts can be defined as the need to act in such a way to reach the mentioned greater good or lesser evil, in a way undeniably legal and legitimate, without this action being a *carte blanche* for arbitrariness or illegitimate conducts. Therefore, a realist and pragmatic analysis unashamed of the problem—which escapes the ideological prepositioning that usually hobbles crisis management processes and prevents the search for suitable and plausible solutions for conflict situations—is today necessary and indispensable in a rapidly changing world subject to many and very diverse threats.

¹ Formulated in these terms by Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe in her essay *Modern Moral Philosophy*, it is deeply rooted in Bentham's utilitarianism and authors such as Kant.

A REVEALING HISTORICAL EXAMPLE

History, as the teacher of life, provides us almost invariably with lessons to really bear in mind for the analysis of conflicts that, despite never reoccurring completely, have some common elements. The generalized loss of this culture of historical analysis leads us to observe with astonishment how mistakes made not just centuries ago, but barely some years ago, appear again and again as alleged solutions to similar problems.

A very recent example in historical terms shows us how a pragmatic and a consequentialist approach to a very important issue is able to provide the best outcomes or, at least, the most acceptable ones, without resorting to illegitimacy, amorality or the discredit of its authors to achieve them, quite the opposite.

With the Treaty of Versailles fully in force, together with the Treaty of Locarno, one of the first relevant challenging actions of the National Socialist regime against the international community after reaching power in Germany was the illegal remilitarization of Rhineland in 1936. The inaction of the powers that had signed the treaties, as a result of a policy of appeasement towards the German Chancellor, meant a renunciation that showed a lack of Allied political leadership and that was inevitably interpreted as weakness by a totalitarian regime like that of Germany. The unilateral denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, the official creation of the *Luftwaffe*² and its strengthening, the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938, and finally of the rest of Czechoslovakia in 1939, were marking the path that led to the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.

A few days earlier, on August 26, Hitler himself had assured his military leaders that neither France nor the United Kingdom would go to war against Germany for Poland, despite the pacts and promises of mutual defence that linked those countries. Clearly, this statement by Chancellor Hitler was not based on an analysis of reality, but on a perception of the impunity that he enjoyed at the time due to the continued and reiterated Allied inaction after the multiple episodes of rupture and violation of international legality for which Nazi Germany had been responsible since 1933.

However, after the war broke out, Britain —following the defeat and occupation of France— and the United States, once it too had joined the war, completely abandoned their hesitant pre-war approach. Indeed, a consequentialist and pragmatic approach prevailed in both countries, to the extent that both the United Kingdom and the United States carved out a solid political and military alliance with Stalin's Soviet Union until the final defeat of Germany. It is worth considering whether greater ideological and social antagonism could

² Aerial warfare of the German armed forces from 1924 to 1945, reorganized and strengthened since 1933. Its existence was publicly announced in 1935, in a flagrant violation of the Treaty of Versailles.

take place between both western allies and Soviet Russia in the international scenario, as occurred in the Cold War after the end of the National Socialist regime.

Nevertheless, the existence of a common enemy, a greater evil following the above reasoning, that seriously affected the security of all the parties and even the survival of the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union as independent nations, led the leaders of these powers to leave their enormous differences behind so as to collaborate closely to defeat Nazi Germany in a paradigmatic exercise of *realpolitik*.

The continued Soviet progress towards the heart of Germany after the decisive Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, together with the Allied entry in German territory in the Spring of 1945, would bring to light all the horror of the extermination camps where millions of people were victim of the “final solution”. Today, with complete awareness and knowledge of the crimes of the National Socialist regime, we justify undoubtedly the correctness of the apparently unnatural alliance forged by leaders such as President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and the President of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union Stalin. The decades-long survival of National Socialism in the heart of Europe, made possible by the existence of evident ideological differences and of particular interests among the powers potentially allied and capable of defeating the Germany of the time, would have had consequences difficult to evaluate but, without any doubt, even more terrible.

PARALLELS BETWEEN ISLAMIC STATE AND THE THIRD REICH. CURRENT SIGNIFICANCE

Without going into the process of creation, transformation and settlement of Daesh³ from other perspectives that have already been sufficiently addressed, the truth is that Daesh’s creation of a pseudostate between Syria and Iraq—so far—has some parallels with the creation of the National Socialist state in Germany:

- It violates international law and it entails a sudden and manifest breakdown of the regional status quo and, ultimately, of pre-existing international relations. Just as the Treaty of Versailles was a dead letter for Hitler and his regime, the legislative and normative framework, that governs the concert of nations from the United Nations, is a dead letter for Islamic State.

Consequently, there is a total lack of respect for the established and recognized borders. Even though the origin and the motivation of this reality are different for both regimes, the truth is that there are not many differences between the images

³ In this article “Daesh” is used as the denomination of the jihadist group, whereas “Islamic State (IS)” is used to refer to the pseudostate founded by Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

showing German soldiers setting up border barriers in the *Anschluss*⁴ and those showing the excavators of IS destroying the boundary pillars between Syria and Iraq.

- Both regimes are based on legendary ideologies. Just as the Nazi ideology used a series of incongruities drawn on Nordic mythology and mixed with a simplistic and extreme version of the racial theories from the last third of the 19th century, so is Daesh's ideology based on a literal and extremely rigorist, interested and arbitrary interpretation of Muslim religious texts from the 7th century, related to a society very different from our present-day society.

In the same way that racial theories are today unanimously rejected and vilified, so is the interpretation of Islam defended by Daesh, not only by the majority of Muslims but also by the main religious authorities. However, there is no doubt that the mythology created by these regimes around these deeply simplistic legends has had, each in their own time and context, a power to capture the attention and the interest of many people.

- Similarly, despite the ideological basis described, both regimes have successfully captured on the street a current of thought and perception of the population of their surroundings, a real breeding ground that has made these populations permeable to their revolutionary and totalitarian messages, portrayed as a hypothetical solution to their problems. It is difficult to think about the triumph of the National Socialist regime in Germany if the German people had not been severely affected by two circumstances that mutually reinforced each other: the national depression due to the defeat in World War I and the economic and social effects of the Great Depression in the country after 1929.

In the case of Daesh, the same parallel can be drawn with two other particularly outstanding circumstances. Firstly, the failure of the attempts at the modernization of Arab states and societies after the independence processes, with failed models such as the socialist-inspired Pan-Arabism led by Egyptian president Nasser, or Ba'athism in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, the popular disenchantment towards the West that resulted from most of the Arab masses portraying our countries as the supporters of the generation of dictators that in countries such as Egypt, Libya or even Iraq and Syria have deprived their population, to a greater or lesser extent, of their civic and political rights, at the same time that they established completely corrupt regimes.

⁴ Annexation and incorporation of Austria to the German Reich on March 12, 1938.

- Regarding the personalism in the leadership of both organizations, there is no doubt that in the National Socialist regime it was very evident, so that Hitler's personal magnetism constituted an essential tool in the Nazi Power (NSDAP)⁵'s rise to power, where from that moment on it promoted a cult to the personality of the chancellor that reached messianic records.

There are more doubts about the indispensable presence of Al Baghdadi as pseudocaliph for the survival of Islamic State, given the pre-existence of Daesh to his leadership and the example of other jihadist organizations that have managed to survive after the death of their leader, Al Qaeda Central and Bin Laden is such an example. However, some elements show us the undeniable weight of the pseudocaliph Ibrahim in the organization.

Perhaps the main element is the direct correlation between Al Baghdadi's rise to the leadership of Daesh and the change in strategy adopted by the group, which has distanced itself from jihadist traditional modes of action. This process has clearly materialized with its rupture from Al Qaeda. However, there is a second element more difficult to notice in the West, and that consists on the enormous political dimension of the act of the "re-foundation" of the caliphate in his person.

It should be noted that, even today, in the Muslim collective imagination, and particularly in the Arab imagination, the figure of the first caliphs, contemporaries of the Prophet, has a significant meaning. Al Baghdadi frequently outlines this circumstance with his actions and his words, trying to imitate as much as possible those caliphs, adopting a tone and a majestic appearance, and the use of a careful classical Arabic.

This leads to the conclusion that the two elements described serve, at the moment, the interests of Daesh but, to a great extent, link its future to the figure of the pseudocaliph, at least in the short-term.

- Another point of parallelism between both regimes is the masterful use of propaganda. The great role in the rise and support of the Nazi regime played by the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, is well-known. He was able to incorporate very modern elements to his role in the area of propaganda. Therefore, the development and the evolution of public broadcasting in Germany was promoted and encouraged by the party from power, as the most useful and effective means for taking Hitler's message and the message of other Nazi leaders to German homes on a daily basis.

⁵ Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei.

The regime worked along the same lines in the promotion of the then very new television. Thus, the fact that the regime already progressed towards a public service television in 1934 was not accidental. This materialized in 1936 with the live broadcast of the Berlin Olympic Games, event that was subject to a massive propaganda campaign. The possibility of uniting Hitler's image with his vibrant oratory, together with the spectacular stagings of the brown shirts' pseudo-military stops, was rapidly perceived by Goebbels as the ideal means to the deification of Hitler and the indissoluble identification of the NSDAP with the German nation.

Similarly, the staging of Daesh's atrocities through a high definition cinematic language, with even a videogame-like aesthetic, and with an intense and very clever use of the internet and social networks, are just the transfer of Goebbels' propagandistic concept to current technological resources. Had the Internet existed in 1934, Chancellor Hitler would have been without any doubt one of the most followed figures in Youtube and Twitter.

- Moreover, the adoption by both regimes of a model of an optimal citizen to be part of the population of their respective territories is of great importance. The adoption of the "Aryan" and National Socialist model for any good German citizen of the Thousand-Year Reich had consequences such as the adoption of eugenics measures, the creation of human farms, the entry into force of the dreadful race laws and, in the end, the murder of political opponents, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and, ultimately, of every person that had the misfortune of not fitting in the "authentic German" model established as the only one acceptable.

Similarly, although without the capacity for action reached by the Nazis, Daesh has established a single model of an "authentic Muslim", perfectly adjusted to its ideological, religious and vital stances. The consequence is the exclusion of other secular inhabitants in the territories controlled by IS, like Shi'as, Christians, Jews, and the well-known case of the Yazidis. The enslavement of these populations, the daily extortion and violence, and very frequently their murder are an essential part of IS daily life. Its purpose is to create a territory—the adoption of the term Islamic State is not arbitrary—as the only place where a "good Muslim" can fully develop his life.

The genocide that is being caused by jihadism is seriously altering the distribution of the different ethnicities and confessions in the region, but it is also having a very significant impact in a Europe now immersed in the so-called refugee crisis. It is enough to recall the creation of the state of Israel as the most direct consequence of the Holocaust—which definitely altered regional geopolitics and generated a source of conflict yet to be resolved—to consider the consequences that could bring a similar genocide and the massive movement of populations provoked by an IE

hypothetically established in the Near and Middle East for years and extended to North Africa.

- Other many contact points can be established between Nazism and IS, as for example their condition of looters and despoilers of artistic and archaeological heritage, but all of these must not distance us from the analysis of the main point of convergence between both regimes. The main and most important point is their condition of criminal regimes, that arbitrarily and daily commit all types of abuses of the most basic and inalienable human rights. Therefore, they were not and they are not acceptable actors within the international community, disabled for every other perspective other than their destruction, given that they present a very serious threat to stability and international security.

THE STRATEGIC CONSTANT THAT ALWAYS COMES TRUE

The issue of the existence in the area of strategy of a sort of constants and principles, of widespread compliance in their application during conflicts, has been traditionally a matter of debate between the critics that question the existence of those principles and those that, very coherently, added to their research the personal acceptance of their reality, expressing in their works their own catalogue of constants or strategic principles.

Therefore, from Clausewitz, with his rules and principles, to more recent authors such as Liddell Hart and his maxims, or the principles that Mao applied in China's civil war, have been defining certain concepts that, without having the status of immutable law and without enjoying infallibility in any way, conform an strategic heritage capable of illuminating and helping civil and military authorities, responsible for developing the strategies of nations or of a group of nations vis-à-vis a common problem.

In any case, it is clear that Corbett⁶'s words:

“By careful collation of past events it becomes clear that certain lines of conduct tend normally to produce certain effects”

make much sense. However, nowadays the result of that long tradition of thought and of its implementation is often forgotten, giving the impression that each new challenge or conflict that arises begins to be studied from an initial position of distrust against the lessons that can be learnt from the past.

⁶ Julian Stafford Corbett, British historian and naval strategist from the end of the Victorian era. He was highly influential in the evolution of the Royal Navy until World War I. His main work is *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

ISLAMIC STATE AND THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST BACKGROUND

In this line of knowledge and of the relatively recent precedent of the consequences generated by the policy of appeasement practiced during the thirties with the Nazi regime, the relative failure of the international community to take action in the face of the emergence of Islamic State and of the actions that within it and from it are carried out on its behalf is remarkable.

Possibly, its preservation and its current expansion, not only in the region of origin, but also in regions as far away as the Sahel, Yemen or even Afghanistan, are only being possible due to the exercise of a short-term inspired *realpolitik* and a narrow understanding by the main actors of the conflict. Therefore, interests are mutually overcome, counteracted, and cancelled. These interests include Russian preservation of the Assad regime at any cost, American priority for the fall of that same regime, Western search for a moderated and democratic Syrian opposition that does not seem to appear on the ground, European vagueness and division about the most appropriate policy to pursue, the instrumental use of jihadist militias by powers in the area as part of their struggle for regional leadership, the consideration of Islamic State as a transitory problem versus the structural problem that the Kurd issue means for Turkey, the Sunni and Shia proselytism held both by Saudi Arabia and Iran, etc.

In the end, a cluster of conflicting interests which add up to the survival and even to the expansion of a regime barely supported by a few tens of thousands of militiamen, mainly armed with light weapons and whose main tool in their arsenal is fanaticism, barbarism and terror. It does not seem reasonable for this to continue.

With the arrival just a few days ago of the Russian forces in Latakia and their military action from what may be the last stronghold of the regime, there is a change in the perspective of the conflict. It can be portrayed from the perspective that it only contributes to “fuel the fire,”⁷ even as a window of opportunity for international collaboration in the resolution of a problem potentially greater than the conflict in Syria. Given Europe’s close geographic proximity to the conflict, and given its security interests, the time for *realpolitik* and for the greatness of thought appears to have come in order to face that dilemma.

The coordinated action of all the relevant actors present in Iraq and Syria, through the essential set of politic, economic, humanitarian, police and military measures, even though that one-time de facto alliance could seem to go against nature, is essential for the disappearance of an unacceptable regime, currently lethal and even more potentially lethal if it is allowed to survive.

⁷ In the words of the United States Secretary of Defense in a conference given at CESEDEN on October 5, 2015.

The memory and the study of the consequences of permissiveness and appeasement practiced by the former Nazi regime must confirm this line, and shed light on the decision-making process for the elaboration of a catalogue of joint, coordinated and decisive actions by the whole international community that prevent this greater evil called Islamic State and international jihadism to increase and may provoke, at some point, an even greater conflict of such dimensions and intensity characteristic of other epochs. The temporary alliance forged by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, based on the conviction of the need to leave the differences behind at that moment and of the consequences of not doing it, can be an example for our leaders to deal with the global and common challenge posed by international jihadism and, especially, by Islamic State.

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