

M.A.D.

Mutually Assured Destruction

Peter Werbe

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when societies began to exhibit mass madness, but it certainly happened as the political state arose some scant four thousand years ago. What delusions of grandeur must have inhabited the mind of the first man to stand atop a ziggurat and announce that he was the representative of the gods on earth, or, crazier, that he was a god manifest with the right to rule over his subjects.

And, what mass psychological process occurred to make those who stood at the base of a pyramid looking upward, those who previously saw themselves as equals in a tribal society, submit to the will of an exalted ruler?

No pre-state society could have survived exhibiting mental illness on such a scale or among its leadership. People we now designate as bi-polar, for instance, in tribal society often were revered as having special spiritual powers. However, an incompetent chief who made bad decisions could cause the extinction of a small band.

With the introduction of mass technics, however, from agriculture to industrialism, the capacity for error that didn't bring down the entire society grew exponentially. In fact, most of what is associated with state society—empire and its wars, famine, slavery, class divisions, and environmental destruction, all of which should have brought about existential crises only create the context in which a rival arises in the place of the failed one with no basic alterations.

In the modern era, with warfare's technological improvements, millions are slaughtered rather than simply tens of thousands. What kind of madmen preside over such catastrophes and how can they mobilize their population to not simply submit to being cannon fodder, but to enthusiastically spill their enemies' blood and destroy their lands with great relish?

George Orwell writes about this illustratively in 1984, where feverish crowds participate in daily Two Minutes Hate against Big Brother's enemy; radical psychotherapist Wilhelm Reich, described the obeisance to authority as part of a mass psychology of submission—fear of a punishing father manifesting itself in obeying the leader or the state.

Nation state madness is perhaps most imaginatively posed by science fiction novelist, Philip K. Dick, whose anarchist views appear in many of his 44 novels. In his 1964, *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, the protagonist lands on what was an Earth colony and immediately becomes enmeshed in rather standard adventures, plots, and conspiracies among rival groups.

He soon learns that the orb he is on is a global psychiatric institution where Earth colonists from other planets with emotional disorders were sent. The people have divided into caste-like diagnostic groups and this is Dick's critique of the contemporary world.

The Pares, those who exhibit paranoia, are the politicians and statesmen and the most steeped in the entanglements that constitute the book's plot. The Manses, the most active class, suffer from mania, and are the planet's warriors, always ready to employ force. There are five other clans who make up the society, but the first two are the ones which create the chaos, all the while posing themselves as guardians of order.

Organized state violence has never wavered, only its means. During the siege of Jerusalem by the knights of the First Crusade in 1099, these crazed religious zealots from Europe slaughtered almost 30,000 Muslims and Jews by hand.

By the arrival of the blood-drenched 20th Century, that many would die during a single day's battle in World War I. One would think that conflict which caused the deaths of tens of millions from war and disease would have lived up to its promise of being "the war to end all wars." However, undeterred by the carnage, the same belligerents renewed their conflict a scant 20-plus years later with a similar horrific loss of life and destruction of cities. The names of Auschwitz, Dresden, and Hiroshima joined with those of the Verdun, Somme, and Ypres battles. It was like the Berserkers, the Old Norse warriors who fought in a nearly uncontrollable, trance-like fury, ruled every nation.

But they weren't. Rather, it was men deemed rational by their societies who pushed people into gas chambers, commanded the firebombing of cities, ordered huge battles, and finally unleashed a weapon that dwarfed all that had preceded it—the atomic bomb.

When the Holocaust was designed or the decision made to drop atomic bombs on Japanese cities, it was done in a detached, bureaucratic manner for the good of the nation. The planners and generals around Hitler and those who advised U.S. President Truman were not berserkers; they wore suits and uniforms, carried briefcases filled with charts and graphs; they had intense discussions about the legitimacy of their planned acts. The former were called war criminals because they lost the conflict.

The first atomic bomb launched at Hiroshima killed 100,000 people with many more dying later; an act unrelated to the war with an all but defeated, ready to surrender Japan. Instead, it was aimed at the Soviet Union with the hopes of diminishing its attempts at post-war communist gains. Truman and his advisers wanted the Soviets to know that the U.S. not only possessed the weapon, but it was willing to use it no matter what civilian toll was exacted.

As the cold war commenced, the U.S., and then the Soviets built nuclear arsenals that threatened one another with retaliation should the other launch a first strike. The destructive power each possessed was further enhanced with the addition of hydrogen bombs capable of being delivered by bombers and intercontinental missiles.

Armaments and delivery systems on both sides had reached such proportions that war strategists postulated that an atomic stalemate had been achieved so that no matter which side launched a first strike, a retaliatory launch would assure the destruction of the other.

The annihilation of the world's population became a possibility and was aptly named MAD. Mutually Assured Destruction.

Emerson's quote of things being in the saddle and riding man comes to mind. A system literally out of control; created by humans but ruled by its technology and potential for error.

Fortunately, several hair raising miscalculations of imminent attacks were caught before the rockets and planes were given their launch orders, and the mere thread of a wire saved the U.S. East Coast from nuclear destruction following an accident in 1961; one among many accidents.

A tense but what the creators contended was a stable global peace was maintained, at least on the nuclear level. However, the delicate balance was always at risk since each side was motivated to build a larger, incapacitating first strike capacity which would hobble the other's ability to retaliate

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Americans reduced their fear of nuclear war to the point where it now is a concern of very few. No more air raid drills or rooftop Russian plane spotting as kids were subjected to in the 1950s. The so-called "nuke fear" was real, but also induced by the U.S. rulers to manipulate the threat from their imperial rival.

But it is an illusion that the threat no longer exists. The U.S. and Russia still have 1,800 warheads on "high alert" that could be switched to launch in 10 minutes, each aimed at the other's major population centers. There are always discussions and even urgings on the part of many in the political and military establishments to sign a treaty to substantially reduce each other's nuclear arsenals, but there is little that ever gets to the policy stage let alone an agreement. As it is, the agreements proposed would leave the U.S. with a thousand serviceable weapons, and the Obama administration has asked for increased funding for the American atomic arsenal.

So, the threat of nuclear attack remains viable and possible from an escalation of tensions or human error. For instance, in May, the Air Force stripped 17 officers of their authority to launch nuclear missiles after the group's commander said the unit suffered from "rot" within its ranks. Could it be different in Russia? One can imagine both here and there, a bunch of young gamers, hung over from a night of clubbing, rubbing their red eyes trying to determine whether a flock of birds are incoming enemy missiles (it happened) or whether a launch command is authentic or not. Our fate as a planet could hang on distorted human perception atop a pitiless technology.

Capitalism itself is a mad system, and what was intended as a defense mechanism against a rival ideology could still create mutual destruction.

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