

HOW EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS CHANGE EVIDENCE FROM SHI'ISM AND SOVIET COMMUNISM

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Executive Summary

Hudson Institute Task Three: Moderation, Re-radicalization and Regime Change in Extremist Ideological Systems

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Policy Challenge

Whether extremist movements will moderate or radicalize themselves now reappears in concrete challenges to American policy every year. Would Hamas, because it was in power, moderate its extremist views? We had no intellectual guidance for this debate. If the Muslim Brotherhood wins elections in Egypt, should we accept it, hoping that it might be moderated by success and responsibility? Should we negotiate with Ahmadinejad's Iran? Should our military planning have anticipated that al-Qaeda in Iraq might destroy itself? Or that Taliban, after being shattered, would grow again into a military threat? Beyond these narrower issues, presented by daily events, there is the greater question of how we can bring jihadist terrorism to an end. Not all the terrorists will be physically annihilated. Will they give up in discouragement? After how long? Or will they moderate their tactics? Or isolate themselves and dwindle into insignificance? These are specific policy issues we constantly collide with, of the utmost importance in an age of revived extremism. But they are issues that have never been clarified by any body of thinking in the way that nuclear strategy was clarified by the terminology and theory of deterrence.

The Study

The study is a historical investigation of this issue: **When, under what circumstances, do extremist movements and regimes (here defined more precisely as universalistic) become more moderate? More radical?** What we lack is a *conceptual* approach to these issues: more exact definitions of terms, identification of multiple paths on which movements

and regimes may be transformed, and a sense of what may trigger these alternative outcomes. The method is historical research into case studies chosen to cover a range of different circumstances.

Definitions

To approach this in an organized way we need first to define exactly what we are investigating. I define the population I am examining as *universalistic movements seeking political power and universalistic regimes*, meaning by “universalistic” movements and regimes those that offer a solution to the whole of mankind and not to one nation or group at a time. Such movements and regimes appeared with early Islam, offering a human solution in this world.

My first purpose is simply to observe in movements’ and regimes’ behavior the incidence of moderation and radicalization over time. Just to establish that there are several such possibilities, and at what times they seem more likely to appear, would be a service to the present policy debate. My second purpose is to establish what seems likely to have caused these changes in the behavior of movements and regimes, within the limits of causal explanation in the incredibly complex historical process.

The dependent variable, which I am trying to observe and measure, is variations in domestic and foreign policy conduct between moderation and radicalization, together with variations in defense policy and military strategy and tactics. Radicalism or extremist conduct I do not, for the purpose of the proposal, regard as necessarily bad.¹ I turn now to **the definition of moderation and radicalization**. These terms are intrinsically relative to each other. After considerable pondering, I reached the conclusion that one has to accept the comparative and situational character of extremism and moderation: i.e. that moderation and radicalization must be understood in comparison with other movements and regimes existing

¹ The anti-slavery movement in the United States which gained power with Lincoln proposed a huge change in the practice of most human societies, but can only be seen as a good. The reader should not assume that extremism is always negative, though it inherently brings great problems to societies and to international relations.

at the same period of history and in the same cultural realm. My definition of more radical behavior, or of extremism, inherently comparative terms, for the purpose of this study requires two elements, one of which must be present, although both are often present together:

- 1) Intentional attempts at relatively quick social transformation, as measured by changes in the existing culture, society and institutions. An obvious question is the relationship of this part of the definition of radicalism or extremism to violence. All attempts to change the society by violence have to be judged as radical or extremist, *most* but *not all* extremist changes are violent. The Imam of Alamut, in the Isma'ili chapter, who proclaimed the *qiyama*, or resurrection (on earth!), expected it to occur among the Nizarian Isma'ilis he ruled not by force, but by his decree and by his subjects' corresponding change of heart.

- 2) A second measure of radical or extremist conduct is the attempt to change the world or other societies by exporting the innovations one sees as beneficent, or the influence and control that would secure them. Of course, the attempt to expand international influence, including war, is the normal conduct of states, and has been questioned in practice only in quite recent times. Even "wars of aggression" are characteristic of traditional interstate relations. Thus there can be severe threats to other states that do not come from the universalistic movements and states I propose to study, and the severity of a threat to others does not measure the extremism of behavior that I am observing and trying to account for. At the same time, history has shown a tendency for the most intense and lasting international threats to emerge from universalistic regimes:

Finally, the third and final element of the research design is, *the causes that may or may not turn out to produce my dependent variable, differing degrees of moderation or extremism in conduct.* The causes of moderation or radicalization of behavior that are of most interest fall into two broad categories, to be further specified below.

- Differences in the nature of the movement, for example: a) how old a movement is; b) whether a movement attains political power or not; c) if it does, whether a movement is successful or unsuccessful in governing; d) how long it has been in power; e) whether a movement is religious or secular, or mixed; f) other differences of doctrine, of which the nature of legitimate leadership turned out to be very important in the course of the research so far.
- Surrounding conditions, for example: a) whether a movement occurs in modern times (ca. 1500--) or earlier, because modernity is a very distinctive era of history in many respects; b) whether the state, if a movement controls it, is powerful enough to attempt general social and economic change; c) how rival powers treat an extremist state--whether they fight it, accept it, or isolate it; d) circumstances of external stress: war, economic depression, famine, etc.

The Historical Case Studies

These questions are studied by examining the evidence of history in the following cases:

- Shi'ism as it progressed from attempts to take power by war to the development of a peaceful alternative (ca. 645-ca. 900), in two chapters;
- The 'Abbasid movement, a militant variety of Shi'ism, ca. 718-861;
- The Isma'ili movement, a reaction to peaceful Shi'ism without an Imam, ca. 850-ca. 1170;
- Soviet Communism, 1914-1921.
- In addition, a separate paper on the Protestant Reformation was done and its generalizations and examples are incorporated in this Executive Summary.

The Trajectories of Extremist Movements

By “trajectories” I mean the curve or graph of moderation or extremism as plotted against time: how long extremist movements last, whether they become more moderate or more radical or oscillate between the two, and at what point in time.

- All the movements studied became more moderate over long periods of time, except Reformation England 1527-1650. English Protestantism was the only movement that became gradually more radical over time. Some historians make the case that from about 1620 English Protestantism was becoming more moderate, and that the radicalism before and during the Civil War was a reaction to it.
- Early and rapid moderation characterized the ‘Abbasids (in power 749-) and Fatimid Isma’ilis (in power 909-) when they gained power, though there was one radicalization considerably later in each case.
- Many extremist movements became much more radical quickly after beginning: the Kharijites (657-), purist egalitarians who considered other Muslims pagans and killed them, the Isma’ili Qarmatians (ca. 900-), who suspended the Islamic law and vandalized the Qur’an, the Nizarian Isma’ilis (1090-), who discovered systematic assassination, German Protestantism, which produced the Peasant War and the communist utopia of Muenster, discovering the concept of cleansing murder. The Soviet regime was most radical during the Civil War (1918-21), trying to end the market and money and to trigger a quick revolution throughout Europe.
- An intriguing finding is a tendency to start one major late radicalization at times ranging from 66 to 110 years (‘Abbasids, Fatimid Isma’ilis, Nizarian Isma’ilis, English Protestantism, Soviet Communism). In all these cases it speeded the collapse of the regime. It is a trait highly relevant to policy, because we do not normally expect a turn to extremism after so long; North Korea is now at 65 years, Iran at 32.
- A not uncommon trajectory oscillates from extremism to moderation and back again: important cases are early Shi’ism after 647, the Nizarian Isma’ilis, and the Soviet regime, where it emerged from the Bolshevik “operational code” as explored by Nathan Leites. A simple reason is that principled extremism can incur major practical costs, while a practical or managerial approach leads to fear of losing dynamism and identity.

- Different areas of policy can follow different cycles. In the Soviet case domestic and foreign policy tended to “compensate” for each other by following opposite rhythms, except 1917-21, 1921-28, 1938-39, 1946-53, and 1982-84, and perhaps 1987-91.
- Worry about the legitimacy of universalistic movements has a major effect on their trajectories; many re-radicalizations are attempts to restore legitimacy. The impact of legitimacy is understated by political scientists and policymakers alike.

Why do movements move toward moderation or radicalization?

1. Differences in the nature of movements. Extremist movements have tremendous momentum; they conserve or restore old patterns.

a. Whether a movement gets power or not. Effects of coming to power:

- (I) The ‘Abbasid and North African Fatimid Isma’ili regimes abandoned radicalism (except Isma’ilis in theology); no similar modern cases.
- (II) Qarmatis, Yemeni Isma’ilis became more radical, perhaps because they worked in less sophisticated societies.
- (III) The Protestant Reformation is a special case because clerics usually sought to influence, rather than wield, power. The Protestant peasants and Anabaptists of Munster became much more radical.

b. What the doctrine of a movement is. A major conclusion of the study is that this is much more important than it would seem.

- (I) Secular movements are much more extreme, surprisingly. This perception contradicts with our awareness of present day Islamism as very extreme, but it is much influenced by the 20th century Left. Consider “the line of the Imam,” 1979-‘80.
- (II) Millenarian movements are more extreme.
- (III) Whether political revolution is available or not. It is a possibility more in Islam than in Christianity, more in modernity than in either.
- (IV) If a movement is religious, whether doctrine encourages political and military activity, is very important. Protestantism produced only one utopian political project, the Muenster Commune. English

Protestantism produced far-reaching political projects, but only in connection with growing secular ideology. No English Protestant cleric ever led an army, Germans tried to so briefly during the peasant wars. Islam was political and religious from the beginning, but Shi'ism began to be slowly depoliticized after 687 by the doctrine of occultation of the Imam.

- (V) Whether a movement contains an esoteric doctrine underneath the open doctrine. If it does, as in the case of Isma'ilism, it can combine with messianic doctrine to produce sudden radicalization.
- (VI) Whether a movement has a social agenda. The 'Abbasids did—equality of Arab and non-Arab Muslims—but such agendas are far more prevalent in modern states, where they enable drastic actions such as Stalin's "elimination of the Kulaks as a class," the deportation of nationalities, etc.
- (VII) A very crucial aspect of doctrine, important for policy, is that **superseded or neglected doctrine accompanies new doctrine like a shadow and can reappear after a long time.** In the 'Abbasid case it returned in 63 years, in the Fatimid Isma'ili case, 102 years, for the Nizarian Isma'ilis 74 years, for the Soviet Union in 1929, 1936, 1956, 1961-66, and finally in Perestroika, a return of themes from Lenin and Stalin's radical follower Zhdanov, but with a new content. Twelver Shi'ites abandoned violent seizure of power at some point in the tenth or early eleventh century, but they continued to look forward to it when the Mahdi returned, so that it could reappear with the Safavids after 1501 and the Islamic Republic after 1978—both lapses of 500 years. Intelligence analysts need to ask whether there are such old elements of doctrine that might return, or be triggered by our policies.
- (VIII) Extremist movements need doctrines that create a place for tactical moderation, as cases like the Kharijites, the Anabaptists of Muenster, and the Levellers in the English Civil War show; they usually take a long time to evolve. The doctrine of *ghayba*—absence or "occultation"

of the Imam—serves this purpose in Shi'ism. Soviet Communists had Lenin's Operational Code, elaborated by Nathan Leites. In both these cases persecution and repeated failures of violence led to learning, and the evolution of useful doctrine. So cases where extremist movements fail, try again, and fail are cases where they are likely to learn and adapt.

(IX) The peripheral strategy used by many Muslim extremists is a kind of tactical moderation, but its advantages are often diminished by the dislike of tribesmen for organized government.

(X) Negotiators normally attempt to moderate extremist movements without a sense of what is possible. Doctrine sets limits to change in both moderate and extremist directions: Lenin could imagine allying with SRs and Mensheviks, not with the "bourgeois" Kadets.

c) **Differences among leaders in different movements**

--Leadership is crucial in determining whether movements take a more extreme or more moderate path and in whether they succeed.

--The Church reform movement might never have split with Rome without Luther, or the Bolsheviks decided to seize power without Lenin.

--All other things being equal, leaders tend to be more moderate, followers more extreme (see the chapter "Emergence of Shi'ism).

--Inexperience often makes leaders more moderate (Mensheviks and SRs in 1917), if they are aware of it. If unaware, like Lenin, it will make them more extreme.

--Founders, if successful, create a tradition—Soviet oscillation between extremism and moderation owes much to Lenin's personality.

--Leadership succession has huge potential for **splits** in movements, and is particularly severe when great leaders die.

--Extremists in movements are more likely to split away than opportunists, giving the opportunists a preponderance. Thus splits work to moderate old movements, to radicalize new ones.

--Splits do not necessarily weaken movements.

2. **Success and failure make movements more moderate or extreme on complicated pathways.**
 - a. Success can breed euphoria and radicalization: Qarmatian Isma'ilis in Arabia after 900, Left Communists after the Bolshevik revolution.
 - b. Success can lead to splits: how to use the Parliamentary victory in the English civil war split the Scots, the Parliament, and the Army, and again split moderates from extremists (Levelers, etc.) within the Army.
 - c. Failure can lead to quick de-radicalization (Anabaptists after Muenster), or to delayed moderation: Shi'ites took 40 years to devise the doctrine of an absent Imam, 300 years to agree on it.
 - d. When movements take the "nobility of failure" path (Shi'ites, Japanese militarists) it produces suppressed radicalization that can result in sudden reversals.
 - e. What determines different outcomes is not clear in these cases.
3. **Moderation of a movement can trigger development of an extreme alternative: Shi'ite doctrine of an absent Imam provoked the development of Isma'ilism.**
4. **Intense external threats interact with Utopianism to create extreme radicalization: Anabaptists of Muenster, Russian Civil War.**
5. **Intense external threats that will return, a pause, and sudden availability of money can encourage military innovation.**
6. **Late in the lifespan of an extremist movement, periodic oscillations can be extreme in form, moderate in content (adoption of Sunnism by the Nizarian Isma'ilis, Gorbachev's Perestroika).**
7. **Late in this lifespan, attempts at reform can stress the system, resulting in rapid decline or regime change: al-Ma'mun's reforms of the 'Abbasid System, Gorbachev.**

Extremism, Moderation, and Warfare

It was a great surprise to learn that **extremism usually degrades military performance**. Examples are the greatest early Islamic extremists, the Kharijites (see Chapter I), the Peasant War of 1525, the Anabaptists of Muenster, the English and French civil wars after the Reformation, and the Russian Civil War. But there are **significant exceptions**, falling into four categories:

- Similar forces with higher morale, examples being the early Muslims, possibly the Fatimid, and certainly the Qarmati, Isma'ilis (ca. 875-), and the Parliamentary New Model Army during the English Civil War. Morale improvement seems to produce the most improvement at the two extremes of modernity: disorganized tribal volunteers and the highly organized modern state.
- Rare cases of improvements in technology and tactics, possibly the Caliph Al-Ma'mun's resort to cavalry, more clearly the Czech Hussites (1419-), Dutch rebels against Spain (Army and Navy) after 1594, the Swedish Army under Gustavus Adolphus, and the English Navy of Cromwell's republic. These cases tend to have in common the lack of military tradition retarding innovation, good leadership, an extreme threat likely to worsen, a pause for reorganization, and the sudden availability of much higher budgets.
- A special and impressive case is the Nizarian Isma'ili discovery of systematic infiltration and assassination after 1090, an innovative resort to asymmetric warfare forced by military and political failure;
- Modern states seized by extremists, the Soviet Union after 1931 (Nazi Germany could be added).

Extremist civil wars have special traits analyzed in the first two chapters on early Shi'ism and in the last section of the separate Reformation study. They include:

- Lack of prior mobilization makes the parties turn to excluded social forces: the radical Shi'ite Mukhtar's resort to non-Arab support in 685-687, picked up by the 'Abbasids, 748-; promotion of officers who were not gentlemen in the English civil war.
- These new constituencies can make new extreme demands: universal suffrage after the English civil war (in 1647!).

- Sometimes the more extreme members of movements are better fighters: the Dutch Sea Beggars against Spain in the 1570s, the Parliamentary New Model Army.
- Extremism breeds counter-extremism: overall the Reformation generated the Counter-Reformation.

Introduction

Policy Challenge

Whether extremist movements will moderate or radicalize themselves now reappears in concrete challenges to American policy every year. Would Hamas, because it was in power, moderate its extremist views? We had no intellectual guidance for this debate. If the Muslim Brotherhood wins elections in Egypt, should we accept it, hoping that it might be moderated by success and responsibility? Should we negotiate with Ahmadinejad's Iran? Should our military planning have anticipated that al-Qaeda in Iraq might destroy itself? Or that Taliban, after being shattered, would grow again into a military threat? Beyond these narrower issues, presented by daily events, there is the greater question of how we can bring jihadist terrorism to an end. Not all the terrorists will be physically annihilated. Will they give up in discouragement? After how long? Or will they moderate their tactics? Or isolate themselves and dwindle into insignificance? These are specific policy issues we constantly collide with, of the utmost importance in an age of revived extremism. But they are issues that have never been clarified by any body of thinking in the way that nuclear strategy was clarified by the terminology and theory of deterrence.

The Study

The study is a historical investigation of this issue: **When, under what circumstances, do extremist movements and regimes (here defined more precisely as universalistic) become more moderate? More radical?** What we lack is a *conceptual* approach to these issues: more exact definitions of terms, identification of multiple paths on which movements and regimes may be transformed, and a sense of what may trigger these alternative outcomes. The method is historical research into case studies chosen to cover a range of different circumstances.

The Transformations of Extremism: An Introduction

The Policy Challenge

Throughout the years 1917-1991 the most important security task for the United States and its allies was understanding extremist movements, such as Communism, Nazism and Japanese fascism, and developing effective policy toward the countries that they controlled. This was no easy task, because these movements were so alien to the American consciousness. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91, it seemed that we were entering a “new world order” in which movements and regimes with behavior outside normal social and state relations had become a marginal phenomenon. The states of the Soviet block were said to be undergoing “transitions to democracy,” China was opening itself to capitalism, Iran becoming less radical, and the Oslo peace process seemed to be healing the intransigent Arab-Israeli conflict. With universal claims of respect for democracy and the market economy, there no longer appeared to be essential disagreements over goals; the only disagreements seemed confined to tactics.

9/11 made it clear that we had misunderstood the significance of 1991. What the collapse of the Soviet bloc *also* did was to greatly exacerbate Sunni political Islam and its dangers, because its adherents were energized by the victory in Afghanistan and, more important, because Muslim regimes had lost their ability to seem big in the world by maneuvering between the US and the U.S.S.R. Besides the creation of al-Qaeda, we also experienced the victory of Taliban, the Palestinian Intifada, the election of Hamas, and the arrival of Ahmadinejad, who re-radicalized the Iranian regime. It is clear that the struggle against terrorism will go on for a long time, and the victory that the Bush administration promised seems far away. While political Islam is the biggest policy headache, its emergence also suggests how unlikely it would be that the extremist tendencies expressed in the Left never reappear. American “unipolar” power at this point in history makes America the focus of opposition to the status quo, and also tends to discourage great power rivals, driving opposition into asymmetrical channels, such as terrorism, that are not channeled by diplomatic interests and habits.

Subject of the Study

We face policy, challenges that alert us to an important general issue, one that is fundamental for policy choices in the age of Islamist terrorism, but about which we lack any intellectual clarity. **When, under what circumstances, and on what issues do extremist movements and regimes become more moderate in their behavior? More radical?** Public discussion of these issues is now carried on with unexamined clichés such as “pragmatists” and “ideologues.” The very concept of moderation used in discussing movements such as Hamas or regimes such as Iran is one transferred from American domestic debate to totally different contexts; it is very abstract. What we lack is a *conceptual* approach to these issues: more exact definitions of terms such as “moderation,” identification of the basic ways that movements and regimes may be transformed (moderation being only one of these), and a sense of the factors in particular movements, regimes, or situations that may trigger these alternative outcomes.

This study will guide and discipline policymakers’ debates on these issues by making necessary distinctions and expanding the range of future scenarios discussed. Our intelligence estimates will be less often surprised by unforeseen developments. Every historical situation is different, but knowledge of the factors (including our own policy) that trigger transformations in different directions should improve our judgment in choosing policies toward movements and regimes that have a potential for extremist behavior. Such an inquiry will never produce perfect predictive power, but the discussion of extremist evolution is so now so chaotic and thoughtless that even broad generalizations will improve it. Even more important is the function of liberating the imagination through understanding the vast range of possible outcomes.

Definitions

To approach this in an organized way we need first to define exactly what we are investigating. I define the population I am examining as *universalistic movements seeking political power, or political influence, and universalistic regimes*, meaning by

“universalistic” movements and regimes those that offer a solution to the whole of mankind and not to one nation or group at a time. Such movements and regimes appeared with early Islam, offering a human solution in this world.

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The dependent variable, which I am trying to observe and measure, is variations in domestic and foreign policy conduct between moderation and radicalization, together with variations in defense policy and military strategy and tactics. Radicalism or extremist conduct I do not, for the purpose of the proposal, regard as necessarily bad. I turn now to **the definition of moderation and radicalization**. These terms are intrinsically relative to each other. After considerable pondering, I reached the conclusion that one has to accept the comparative and situational character of extremism and moderation: i.e. that moderation and radicalization must be understood in comparison with other movements and regimes existing at the same period of history and in the same cultural realm.² My definition of more radical

² All Muslim regimes were, off and on, less moderate compared to those of classical antiquity, because they used some of their political power to achieve transcendental religious goals as defined by written scriptures or “ideologies”—something that would have amazed earlier politicians and citizens. All modern regimes, including the liberal-democratic, are likewise less moderate *in comparison with earlier systems*. But in considering the texture of politics at a given time, the important difference begins with the fact that most Islamic regimes only enforced the Islamic law internally and attempted where possible to expand Islamic rule. Immoderate in comparison were the actions of some Kharijites, who deposed and killed their monarch or Imam after concluding he was not pious and virtuous, or some Shi’ite movements, which produced founders claiming to be the *mahdi* or savior, and sometimes even asserted that the ruler was God (the Fatimid Caliph Hakim, Shah Isma’il). They should therefore be judged as less moderate at that time and place. Similarly, the October Revolution occurred against the background of many Socialist movements, some of which had participated in ruling, which had accepted for practical purposes the existence of extensive private property, of exploiting classes, of the democratic politics that allowed them to be influential, and of religion. Relative not only to the “bourgeois” governments, but also to most socialist movements, Soviet communism began to act in less moderate ways—for example, by nationalizing property or seizing the peasants’ grain—in the first years after the Revolution. Similarly within a regime, one can define one ruler as more radical than another, or more radical in one policy area than another. Stalin can be seen as less moderate in the Soviet context because he broke the taboo, developed by Lenin and therefore authoritative, against blood purges *within the Party*. In trying to develop these situational understandings of moderation and radicalization, I will pay careful attention

behavior, or of extremism, inherently comparative terms, for the purpose of this study requires two elements, one of which must be present, although both are often present together:

- 3) Intentional attempts at relatively quick social transformation, as measured by changes in the existing culture, society and institutions. An obvious question is the relationship of this part of the definition of radicalism or extremism to violence. All attempts to change the society by violence have to be judged as radical or extremist, *most* but *not all* extremist changes are violent. The Imam of Alamut, in the Isma'ili chapter, who proclaimed the *qiyama*, or resurrection (on earth!), expected it to occur among the Nizarian Isma'ilis he ruled not by force, but by his decree and by his subjects' corresponding change of heart.
- 4) A second measure of radical or extremist conduct is the attempt to change the world or other societies by exporting the innovations one sees as beneficent, or the influence and control that would secure them. Of course, the attempt to expand international influence, including war, is the normal conduct of states, and has been questioned in practice only in quite recent times. Even "wars of aggression" are characteristic of traditional interstate relations. Thus there can be severe threats to other states that do not come from the universalistic movements and states I propose to study, and the severity of a threat to others does not measure the extremism of behavior that I am observing and trying to account for. At the same time, history has shown a tendency for the most intense and lasting international threats to emerge from universalistic regimes: the Muslim Caliphate from 622 to about 850, the Almoravids and Almohads, the Catholic Spanish states during and after the Reconquista, the

to the internal definitions that some religions and political movements develop. Islam, for example, has an important place for the consensus of the *'umma*, the Islamic community as a whole, or of the *'ulama*.' While there is no concept of heresy in the Christian sense in Islam, there are certain actions that came to be almost universally recognized as outside the borders of Islamic behavior: the claim of a human being to divinity or to being a prophet after Muhammad, and the accusation of *kufr*, that members of other sects are not Muslims. This has been only rarely asserted, as by the Azraki Kharijites in the first centuries of Islam and by today's Wahhabi terrorists. So these positions have been frequently labeled by most Muslims as *ghul'u*, extremism. The solution above is complex. But it seems superior to absolute, non-situational definitions that would be magnets for criticism, and superior to giving up on the attempt to identify moderation or radicalization of political action.

Hapsburgs during the Wars of Religion, the Ottoman Empire 1299-1566, the early Safavids, the various Muslim empires in India, the French Revolutionaries, the Fascist and the Communist regimes. Similarly, many of the greater non-universalistic international threats have been infused by universalistic ideology: the Spanish Hapsburgs and Louis XIV, for example, by militant Catholicism and its absolutist theories, the Dutch seaborne empire by militant Calvinism.

Finally, third and final element of the research design is, *the causes that may or may not turn out to produce my dependent variable, differing degrees of moderation or extremism in conduct*. In a scientific experiment, this aspect of the problem would be called the independent variable, and should be strictly limited to one thing, or at worse very few, to hold the elements of the causal inquiry constant enough to produce a clear test. History is far more complicated, and the simplification that strict social science methodology would require would make the study far less interesting. Therefore I have put “independent variable” in quotes here. The causes of moderation or radicalization of behavior that are of most interest fall into two broad categories, to be further specified below.

- Differences in the nature of the movement, for example: a) how old a movement is; b) whether a movement attains political power or not ;c) if it does, whether a movement is successful or unsuccessful in governing; d) how old a movement is; e) how long it has been in power; f) whether a movement is religious or secular; other differences of doctrine, of which the nature of legitimate leadership turned out to be very important in the course of the research so far.
- Surrounding conditions, for example: a) whether a movement occurs in modern times (ca. 1500--) or earlier, because modernity is a very distinctive era of history in many respects; b) whether the state, if a movement controls it, is powerful enough to attempt general social and economic change; c) how rival powers treat an extremist state--whether they fight it, accept it, or isolate it; d) circumstances of external stress: war, economic depression, famine, etc.

We need next to specify the possible paths on which extremist movements and regimes may be transformed. We can begin by simply imagining simple possibilities, such as moderation and radicalization. But this does not carry us far. We were surprised by the radicalization of the Iranian revolution, from Bakhtiar and Bazargan to Khomeini, surprised by the advent of *perestroika* and then by its outcome, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and finally by the failure of the “transition to democracy” on its former soil. If we proceed by simply imagining the outcome of the present situation, we can be crippled, as we were in the cases cited, by lack of imagination, or by wishful thinking, as in the Iraq intervention. It is easy to extrapolate known trends, but treacherous.

Therefore we need the help of history. Surveying long periods of time enables us to overcome the tendency to extrapolate trends. To encounter unexpected outcomes in history counters wishful thinking. And to contemplate the unexpected and amazing events that interrupted historical development frees the imagination looking toward our own time.

Moderation

Moderation is the most prominent transformation of extremist politics in our public debate. The assumption that it will happen often acts a kind of sleeping pill, preventative of greater worry and concern; the appeasement policies of the ‘thirties were its most disastrous application. Of course, there are other cases where this assumption proves to be correct; after calling for world revolution the Bolsheviks turned to the policy of Socialism in One Country. Moderation of movements that have behaved in extreme ways is indeed known in our wider historical experience. But attitudes and conduct **may vary across issues**. Napoleon moderated the extremist policies of the Jacobins in almost every area except international relations, where never rested after any of his conquests and finally ruined his attained domination of continental Europe by invading Russia. In our own times, China has become very moderate in its economic policies by allowing private business and foreign investment to flourish. Yet interference with the family and with religion (as is shown by the campaign against Falun Gong) remain extreme. It may be most common to moderate foreign policy,

as Stalin did by the doctrine of Socialism in One Country, in tandem with more radical domestic policy. Hannah Arendt noted that “moderation in foreign policy or the political line of the Comintern is almost invariably accompanied by radical purges in the Russian party,”³ although it should be added that this pattern did not hold in 1939-41, during Beria’s ascendancy in 1953, or during perestroika. Within an issue area, such as foreign policy, **policy may vary for different geographical areas.** The Islamic Republic in Iran, which began by using the slogan “the two Satans” for the United States and the Soviet Union, rapidly moderated its policy toward the Soviet Union, and later toward Russia, while maintaining a much more hostile policy toward the US and Britain to this day. To enjoy the perceived advantages of moderation and radicalism together, some movements and regimes have formulae that build in the temporariness of moderation, or some form of **alternation between moderation and radicalism.** The “line of the party,” which frequently changed on orders from the Kremlin, was one such alternation. Another, more interesting, case is found in the early Islamic radical movements, Kharijism and Shi’ism. Both failed in establishing general control over the Islamic world. Both eventually developed doctrines according to which there were through history inherent periods of alternate militant *jihad* and moderation (*kitman* and *ghayba* or “occlusion,” disappearance, of the rightful Imam, in their respective doctrines). The strain of Wahhabism now influencing Muslim radicals such as Osama bin Laden and the Taliban badly needs such a doctrinal innovation; its appearance would signal a relative moderation of their movements. Present-day Iranian Islam has long proceeded under conditions of the absence (“occultation”) of the Imam, and therefore this excuse for moderating extremist policy works less powerfully. Khomeini and now Ahmadinejad have hinted at the coming of the messianic “Twelfth Imam,” thus justifying more extreme policies. Both these cases show an important principle of extremism, that **old positions, moderate or extreme, continue to exist as a kind of shadow behind the present position, and can reappear suddenly.** The Iranian Revolution in 1978-79, like the coming of the Safavids in 1501, was a dramatic reassertion of the short-term messianism, politicization of Shi’ism, and violence that began to be systematically renounced by the Imams themselves from the middle of the eighth century.

³ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1965), Harvest paperback, 415.

The Bolshevik “**Operational Code**,” brilliantly elaborated by Nathan Leites and now almost ignored by scholars, was an ingenious way of “having it all” by combining inspiring, extremely Utopian long-term goals with very realistic tactics that required much moderation, in some phases of history, in the pursuit of these goals, much cultural change, and much self-overcoming on the part of the Bolshevik elite. By disciplining extremism without negating it, it made Bolshevik fanaticism an extremely supple and effective instrument for the expansion of power. On the other hand, it came at a price: it sacrificed much of the international support Soviet communism could have gained by an intransigent, idealistic policy; think of the vast disillusionment that followed the Hitler-Stalin Pact. It also assumed a long-term favorable tide of history and the possession of a powerful position. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze justified the abandonment of Eastern Europe by the “Brest-Litovsk” tactics of advance and retreat, but the fundamental position of Soviet communism was so weak that the result was retreat that could never be retrieved. To realize the importance of the operational code is learn an important lesson for policy. **To evaluate the danger of an extremist movement to the United States, it is important to consider not only its attitude toward us and its aims, but its characteristic tactics as well.**

Investigation of the early history of extremist movements, before they became threats, is a useful means of discerning these tactics. The Bolshevik operational code, as Leites shows, evolved during polemics between Russian leftist groups. I found in researching the topic for Net Assessment that the Russian Social Democratic Party actually originated around 1890 as a reaction against crazily utopian expectations from individual terror, as employed earlier by the Narodniks. In other words, Bolshevik extremism began as a movement toward relative moderation. The result was the acquisition of a much more seductive overall ideology, Marxism, and the evolution during struggle with the Tsarist autocracy and within the Left of the operational code. (One wonders whether the half-free, half-repressed conditions under which organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood operate in places such as Egypt could evolve another such synthesis.) Thus, another important principle is that **turns toward moderation can indirectly generate renewed extremism.**

Moderation on Gaining Power

A very important subdivision of moderation processes is moderation after a political movement is victorious and gains political power and the responsibilities that go with it. Martin Kramer has argued in a short polemical piece that the “hidden assumption” that “power has a moderating effect upon those who share or exercise it” is “probably the most cherished axiom in the paradigm,” that is, in the normal assumptions used in political debate to understand extremist movements.⁴ Clearly this is assumed too often. There are some historical cases, however, that seem to confirm the moderating effect of power: the Abbasid (750 AD), and Fatimid (906AD) revolutions quickly abandoned their most radical doctrines and broke with their more radical supporters. The English revolution (1640-1661) became more radical over some two years in order to win the Civil War, then reined in its most radical impulses. Nevertheless, the French Revolution in the first few years, the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, and in some ways the Iranian revolution offer clear counterexamples. Here the possession of power only whetted their appetite for radical excesses. It is precisely in this kind of case, where the possession of power can lead to two opposite outcomes, that we need more detailed examination of history to see whether there are any variables that explain such different results. The results of my research so far suggest that medieval Islamic religious movements tended more to moderate on gaining power, while modern secular extremisms radicalized. Modern Islamic extremisms vary and waver in between. Why have modern Islamic extremisms tend to be more radical in power? One possible explanation is the influence of the secular left, another the enormously greater power over society that modern states put at the disposal of those who control them.

Radicalization

The experience of the French revolution, which passed from easy victories and general acceptance within France to negate its own institutions and devour its own leaders in successive upheavals, gave observers such as Burke and Hegel an opposite impression: that

⁴ Martin Kramer, “The Mismeasure of Political Islam,” in Martin Kramer, ed., *The Islamism Debate*, (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 1997), 161-73.

extremist movements have in them an inner logic, a “spirit of pure negation” that tends to greater and greater extremes.⁵ The French revolution did eventually develop its own “Thermidor,” wonderfully analyzed by Hippolyte Taine, an exhausted, cynical stage that paved the way for Napoleon’s restoration of monarchy and aristocracy,. But other revolutions such as the Chinese have become more and more extreme—in the Chinese case, from taking power in 1949 at least up till the early ‘seventies, during the period of the Cultural Revolution. In recent years, Sunni Islamism has taken a more and more extreme form, from quasi-nationalist forms that accepted democracy at least in principle to fierce rejection opposition to democracy in the name of a totally abstract Caliphate, widespread acceptance of terrorism and “martyrdom,” and refusal to unite with Shi’is against the West.

Sometimes radicalization takes the form of change from a clearly moderate movement to a radical one. Professor Guilain Denoeux has argued that “Radical Islamist ideologies often trace their roots to mainstream Islamic worldviews, and extremist Islamist movements often develop out of moderate ones.”⁶ Denoeux uses the example of the long-established non-political group *Tabligh-i-Jama’at*. While others debate this specific interpretation, longer periods of history show clear examples, like the emergence of Taliban out of the conservative, non-radical milieu centered around the Deoband madrasa in India, with the help of the Soviet-Afghan war and the ISI. Turns toward greater moderation can also spark sudden conversion by some movement members to more extreme radicalism. The striking case in my research is how the doctrine of the occultation of the Imam, surely intended in part to moderate unsuccessful rebellions, triggered a more extreme return to messianic Shi’ite efforts to achieve a just order by violence in the Isma’ili movement. The moderation of this movement, in turn, by its own leader, just before the acquisition of power, provoked a split, generating new attacks as well as extreme doctrinal radicalization.

⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, passim; G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), paperback ed., paragraphs 588-593 (Pages 358-363) and *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree from the edition of Karl Hegel, (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 449-452. This literature is still of great interest in understanding extremism.

⁶ Guilain Denoeux, “The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam,” *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, vol. IX, no. 2 (June 2002), accessed at mepc.org/journal_vol_9/0206_denoeux.asp.

Re-radicalization

The neglected complement to moderation is re-radicalization. It is almost never discussed today, though it had some treatment in works on totalitarianism, so it is more difficult to outline this process. Re-radicalization can be a response to the growing moderation of a movement or regime, which creates a sense of the lost of vitality and purity. NEP in the U.S.S.R. thus generated pressures for collectivization, industrialization and terror; Brezhnev's "Era of Stagnation" generated the dynamism of Andropov, ending in Gorbachev's frantic innovation. This process is seen in religious extremism as well: as Bernard Lewis argues, the proclamation of the Resurrection, explained below, by the Nizarian Isma'ilis, with the abolition of the Shari'a, responded to a sense that the movement had lost its vitality and degenerated into a rural cult. The mere passage of time can create a sense of the loss of revolutionary élan, generating in turn a demand for renewal of the revolution. From the above, we can see that success of an extremist movement is one circumstance that can produce re-radicalization. But failure can produce the same result. Sometimes extremist movements that are failing see the cause in excessive caution or compromises. The Nazis during 1944, Mussolini after he was ousted, and in a more complicated sense Yuri Andropov exemplify this mechanism. Re-radicalization can produce, and is greatly complicated and diversified by, **splits in movements**, which sometimes lead to self-destruction—and thus to disappearance of the problem, which we normally hope for from moderation. This was the outcome in Algeria when the FIS was denied its electoral victory, took arms and split into more and more radical groups, which lost its earlier widespread support and turned against each other. We have seen it repeated in the Iraqi insurgency, where the moderate elements tired of al-Qaeda's extremism and split away from it.

Not enough attention has been given to the **cyclical patterns of moderation and re-radicalization** that extremist regimes sometimes display.⁷ If there is a tendency to react to

⁷ Cyclical oscillation characterizes Thucydides' and, more obviously, Ibn Khaldun's philosophies of history, but the first social scientist to notice it was the anthropologist Robert Montagne, writing on pre-colonial Berber political communities. Myron Rush propounded in *The Politics of Succession in the U.S.S.R.*, (New York:

radicalism with moderation and another tendency to recoil from moderation with re-radicalization, these two tendencies are likely to issue in oscillation between these two positions. In fact, the Soviet Union did veer from “coexistence” or détente to confrontation, and from soft to hard in its domestic policy. In my research, I found that this pattern is also characteristic of pre-modern religious extremism, but the oscillation was less frequent and usually represented different leaders, not different choices by the same leader. A very intriguing religious example of the cyclical pattern can be found in the positions taken up by the successive leaders of the radical Isma’ili Shi’i state in Iran during the Middle Ages.⁸ This collection of enclaves, centered in the castle of Alamut on an inaccessible rock in the Alborz mountains north of Teheran, was another product of the wave of radical Shi’ite revolutionary propaganda, beginning in the ninth century, that produced the much larger Fatimid Caliphate. The Isma’ilis in Iran had split away from the Fatimid Imam, but had been much less successful in the conquests that gave prestige to new causes. The resultant frustration, according to Bernard Lewis and other scholars, produced an amazing turn in revolutionary history during the reign of Hasan II, in 1164. In the midst of the Ramadan fast Hasan called together his followers, facing away from Mecca, around a pulpit and proclaimed himself the *Qa’im*, the Isma’ili messiah who will come at the Last Day. As such he announced that the *Qiyama*, literally “resurrection,” “the culmination of the ages,”⁹ had come, but on earth. It consisted of the abolition of the Islamic law, including the ordinary prayers; the crowd broke the Ramadan fast with a great feast where men and women, wearing the same clothes, drank the forbidden wine. As the Isma’ili scholar Farhad Daftary notes,

Columbia University Press, 1965) a cyclical theory of Soviet succession with resulting oscillation of policy between conservatism and radicalism, of the right or the left. The implications for re-radicalization were generalized by Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., "The Nature of the Beast," *The National Interest*, Special Issue, (Spring, 1993), pp. 46-56.

⁸ The most important source is the historian Ata Malik Juvaini. Striking descriptions can begin with the work of Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: a Radical Sect in Islam*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003), first published in 1967.

⁹ Farhad Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 388.

The announcement of the *qiyama* was in fact a declaration of independence from the larger Muslim society and, at the same time, an admission of failure of the Nizari struggle to take over that society; for the *qiyama* declared the outside world irrelevant.¹⁰

Thus the episode of the *qiyama* is highly suggestive about what can cause abrupt shifts toward radicalization of conduct, as is its sequel in regard to moderation. After a while, in the time of Jalal al-Din Hasan, Hasan II's grandson, this radicalization began to seem routine and unexciting in turn. So the Imam called together his followers again for another great ceremony, "proclaimed his adherence to Sunni Islam [the extreme opposite of Isma'ilism], publicly cursed his predecessors, and imposed the Sunni *Shari'a* on his followers."¹¹ Such amazing reversals are partly dependent on the authoritarian Shi'i doctrine about the need to unquestionably obey living Imams, but are paralleled in Khrushchev's Destalinization and Gorbachev's perestroika. Such events are altogether beyond the ken of our policy debate—until they happen--but they should not be in an age when religious enthusiasm is a major motivating force and a problem for our policy. It should not be assumed that the cyclical alternation oscillates back and forth indefinitely in the same way. In the case of the Nizarian Isma'ilis, veering back and forth between conflicting extremes, seems to have played a role in the sapping of the missionary and military vigor of the movement and its conversion into the peaceful and Westernizing remnant now headed by the Aga Khan.

Radicalism in Form, Moderation in Content

There are also complex combinations with outcomes that we would not expect. Gorbachev represented in his own consciousness a re-radicalization of Communism in its old age, fat and tame: he proclaimed that "perestroika is a revolution." But in practice Perestroika turned into a neo-Bolshevik mobilization with Westernizing content. The result was not gradual moderation of an extreme regime, as most Western policymakers had hoped, but desperate, thoughtless changes that resulted in collapse and regime change. A very

¹⁰ Daftary, 389.

¹¹ Wilfred Madelung, "Isma'iliyya," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition, s.v., Vol. IV, 205.

important process of change in history, totally neglected in our policy debate, is that **the form remains the same, but the content changes**. Quakers got their nickname because they were regarded in the seventeenth century as the most extreme religious fanatics, but became over time extreme idealists whose agenda is almost indistinguishable from a secular leftist one. This kind of complexity is little discussed in the literature; it appears, but without any reference to policy, in the interpretations of Max Weber and R.H. Tawney¹² that Calvinism acted as a vehicle for early capitalist attitudes. According to this interpretation, which remains controversial, the form of personal conduct, rigor and self-abnegation, remained the same, but the goal shifted. It might be thought that this kind of shift could happen only over a long period of time, as with the Quakers, but the changes from extreme militarism to extreme pacifism of the Anabaptists occurred quickly after the military defeat of their millenarian community at Muenster. The swiftness of this change flowed not only from defeat, and from their status as a small minority, but from Christian doctrine, much less attracted to violence than is Muslim doctrine. The old hymn “Onward Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war,” not literally *to* war, perfectly captures this resistance.

¹² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.

I. The Emergence of Shi'ism

The Succession to Muhammad's Role

Shi'ism was born out of the question of who should be Muhammad's successor—or his half-successor, since Muhammad had defined himself as “the seal of all the prophets,” like the seal that closes up a finished letter: the last prophet. It is very difficult--probably impossible--to know what actually happened at the death of Muhammad and during the lives of the first four Caliphs. As always with early Islam, the sources are late and partisan, because by the time the surviving accounts of the end of Muhammad's life began to be written 150-200 years later, the chroniclers were adherents of one of the conflicting claimants to his succession. Arabian tribal custom would suggest the choice of the eldest and most forceful member of the clan of the preceding ruler, but the following events suggest that the amazing innovation of a new monotheistic religion weakened these expectations.

Muhammad had no living sons, and his closest male relative, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, was young. In any case, the final prophet's own choice is more authoritative than any rules of descent. Before he died, Muhammad did not publicly designate an heir in a way that would place his choice beyond doubt and give it official force. Muhammad *had* done two things that, according to the subsequent partisans of the contending camps, indicated an inclination. At Ghadir Khumm, late in his life, he had apparently said about 'Ali, ““Do I not have more authority over you (*awla bi kum*) than you have yourselves?” When the people replied, "Yes, indeed," then the Prophet declared: "Whoever's *mawla* I am, this 'Ali is his *mawla*.”¹³ Perhaps we should, in the light of the first sentence, translate *mawla* here as “authority,” and admit that its meaning is ambiguous. Because this *hadith* (saying of Muhammad) appears in both Sunni and Shi'ite collections, with good chains of transmission, the Prophet is likely to have said it. But whether he meant to name 'Ali as his

¹³ Hadiths.....as translated in “Ghadir Khumm and the Orientalists,” at the Shi'ite web site www.najaf.org/english/book/20/.4.html, accessed June 23, 2008. The word *mawla* can have various meanings, some contradictory: master, lord, slave, benefactor, beneficiary, protector, patron, client, friend, charge, neighbor, guest, partner, son, uncle, cousin, nephew, son-in-law, leader, and follower.

successor or simply to support him against critics is less clear.¹⁴ The Shi'i interpretation that eventually emerged was that Muhammad had designated 'Ali as his successor on God's explicit instructions to do so, and that Muhammad and his descendants through his daughter Fatima and her husband 'Ali had a spark of divine light and were constituted by God as an infallible authorities for believers. Shi'ites use for such a religious authority the Arabic word *imam*, the term universally used for the leader who directs the prayers in a mosque. The dominant tradition of Western scholarship considers the issues between 'Ali and his opponents to have been merely political -- over leadership of the community -- and not religious. But Shi'ites could easily claim that these scholars tend to assume, without adequate evidence, that the Sunnism is the main tradition of Islam and Shi'ism a "schism" from it.¹⁵ Subsequently, when Muhammad became too sick to lead the Friday prayers, as he

¹⁴ According to the eminent scholar Laura Vecchia Vaglieri, *Encyclopedia of Islam*², afterwards *EI* 2, s.v., "It is, however, certain that Muhammad did speak in this place and utter the famous sentence, for the account of this event has been preserved, either in a concise form or in detail, not only by al-Ya'kubi, whose sympathy for the 'Alid cause is well known, but also in the collection of traditions which are considered canonical, especially in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal; and the hadiths are so numerous and so well attested by the different *isnāds* that it does not seem possible to reject them." However, she interprets the context so as to weaken the force of Muhammad's statement: "On this point, Ibn Kathīr shows himself yet again to be the percipient historian: he connects the affair of Ghadir Khumm with episodes which took place during the expedition to the Yemen, which was led by 'Ali in 10/631-2, and which had returned to Mecca just in time to meet the Prophet there during his Farewell Pilgrimage. 'Ali had been very strict in the sharing out of the booty and his behaviour had aroused protests; doubt was cast on his rectitude, he was reproached with avarice and accused of misuse of authority. Thus it is quite possible that, in order to put an end to all these accusations, Muhammad wished to demonstrate publicly his esteem and love for 'Ali. Ibn Kathir must have arrived at the same conclusion, for he does not forget to add that the Prophet's words put an end to the murmuring against Ali."

¹⁵ The distinctive endeavor we now consider the only way of doing scholarship arose in the eighteenth century, during the anti-religious Enlightenment, and its tone tended to be set by scholars in countries of Protestant culture: England, the Netherlands, and above all Germany. Many of the greatest German scholars were in fact the sons of Lutheran ministers. A Shi'ite could argue that people with this formative experience were predisposed to criticize religious concepts that seemed to them superstitious. The same is true of Jews, who after the mid-nineteenth century played, as Bernard Lewis notes, an extremely important role in the scholarship on Islam. What is even clearer is that, as Nietzsche says in Part 6 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, the great scholars were "critics" or debunkers. Seen in the light of history, the scholarship they did worked -- through the Higher Criticism's debunking of the unity, and historicity and therefore the authority, of the Bible, of classics such as Homer (F. A. Wolf), and of the heroic virtues of the early Greeks and Romans (B. G. Niebuhr) -- to discredit the authority of revealed religion and of classical antiquity, and thus cleared the way for the modern national state. One of the greatest early scholars of Islam, Julius Wellhausen, was also the most famous critic of the unity of the Pentateuch. Such scholars thus tended to be even more critical of complex forms of belief that found the supernatural in human beings than of ones in which it was confined, as in Protestantism, to the unseen. In our times this tendency was shown, before 9/11, by many Western specialists' attraction to Salafism or Wahhabism. After Hegel, moreover, a pervasive belief in change and development guided scholars, which predisposed them to see religion, like everything else, as evolving from simple to complex forms. Thus one would tend to assume that the original debate between 'Ali and his opponents was confined to who should rule. Likewise the nineteenth-century scholars took from Hegel the belief that religions are linked with an ethnic *volksgeist*, reinforced later by cruder forms of racism, and thus looked to the Arabs, who are largely Sunni, for "original" Islam, seeing Shi'ism as Iranian and derivative. Finally, scholars may have been unconsciously

had done as the head of the Muslim community, Muhammad asked the elderly Abu Bakr, an enemy of 'Ali, to replace him. This was the second act that might have implied a designation as his successor.

After Muhammad's death, the result of all this ambiguity was a dangerous situation in which the various groups and leaders that then comprised the Islamic community seemed to pulling apart. The forceful 'Umar ibn al-Khattab settled these uncertainties by nominating Abu Bakr as the Prophet's *khalifa*, his "successor" or Caliph, and Abu Bakr then received the *ba'ya* or oath of allegiance of the people, still given to the Sultan of Morocco. He was accepted by most eminent Muslims but not, for several months, by 'Ali, who was at enmity with Abu Bakr's family and his partisans. We simply do not know whether 'Ali opposed Abu Bakr's selection because he knew Muhammad intended him in this role, or for other religious reasons, or because of Arab tradition, or out of ambition, or because of personal hostility.

Leadership Succession as a Political Problem

Since the sources are so late and questionable, it may be useful to reason about the situation from other comparable situations of succession to great spiritual or civil leaders. Because leadership succession, something insufficiently studied by political scientists, greatly affects the development of the extremist movements and regimes we will study here, it is worth stating some of the problems that history has shown in a general way. A great man attracts followers for whom his authority is decisive; they care tremendously about his preferences, and indeed believe things because a man so impressive says them. We know this phenomenon in the case of Muhammad from the large number of *hadiths*, largely

influenced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims, some ninety percent, are Sunni today, and by the atmosphere of the places where they studied Islam. These tended to be in the Western part of the Ottoman Empire, more accessible until the Suez Canal was opened in 1867, and in Western colonies and quasi-colonies, particularly India, Egypt, and Algeria. Persia and Yemen, the Shi'ite majority countries, were never colonized, less accessible, and less studied. Finally, the greatest difficulty of scholarship is that it consists of ordinary men and women trying to understand men and women, civilizations, epochs and religions that attract their notice because they were somehow great. This can lead unconsciously to a tendency to bring these things down to our level: Harold Lasswell, a Professor at Yale, ascribed Napoleon's desire to rule all Europe to his (allegedly) small penis. Of course, it is only through scholars that we even become acquainted with the greatness of the past. And it is scholars themselves who, over time, criticized most of these assumptions.

ignored by scholars, reporting spiritually and politically unimportant details of Muhammad's tastes or conduct, such as his liking for perfume. From the great man's huge authority over his followers it follows that, for each of them, the great man's esteem for him is desperately important. Therefore there is a tremendous tendency to rivalry among followers for the favor of the great man, a tendency often concealed while he is alive.

No great man can have a real successor, because such men are very few; the case of a final Prophet only makes apparent what is the situation of every great man. When a great man founds a movement and a political community, as Muhammad did, he nevertheless must choose a successor, although no one can succeed to his greatness or his privileged relationship with God. Thus succession to great founders is an enterprise as impossible as squaring the circle. The difficulties are exacerbated by latent rivalry among followers for the approval and favor of the great man. If the great man is perceptive, he must be aware that the choice of a successor has potential to split the movement and destroy a new political community. The choice of a successor to the founder of a religion depends on competing criteria: religious seriousness, loyalty to the founder's message, and popularity among the faithful. Because the faith Muhammad preached was also a political community, political competence was also needed in a successor. As the "lame duck" phenomenon in the second terms of American presidents shows, the existence of an assured successor tends to make authority flow away from a leader. Many designated heirs have become the center of opposition to leaders. Macaulay writes of the period before him that "since the accession of George the First, there have been four Princes of Wales, and they have all been almost constantly in opposition."¹⁶ Indeed, many sons have dethroned their fathers, as Selim the Grim did the Ottoman Sultan Bayezit II or the Russian Tsar Alexander I did his father Paul. It was probably for these reasons that most Soviet leaders chose an heir and a "counter-heir," whose function was to prevent the designated successor from accumulating enough power to threaten the leader.¹⁷ Such arrangements have the flaw that they may prevent the designated

¹⁶ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Thackeray's History of the Earl of Chatham" in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1857), Vol. II, 262.

¹⁷ Thus for Stalin, G. M. Malenkov was the heir, N. S. Khrushchev the counter-heir; for Khrushchev, Brezhnev the heir, Podgorniy the counter-heir, and so forth. See Myron Rush, *The Politics of Succession in the U.S.S.R.*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965). My entire treatment of succession in this book owes much to his innovative exploration of the topic.

heir from succeeding in the utterly changed circumstances after the death of a leader, especially if he is a great man; Stalin's ultimate heir was not his choice, Giorgi Malenkov, but Nikita Khrushchev.

These difficulties must account for the surprising fact that many great men did not choose successors or did so only at the last minute, in a way that was not sufficient to establish the successor's authority. To take only a few examples, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Jesus of Nazareth, Hegel, the Bab (Sayyid Mirza 'Ali Muhammad, who founded a new religion that was to become the Baha'is in 1844), Lenin, and Gorbachev did not clearly designate a successor. Other rulers, such as Edward VI and Elizabeth I of England, did so only at the last minute, weakening the designation's authority; Edward's chosen heir, Lady Jane Gray, was proclaimed Queen but could not hold onto the throne. So Muhammad's failure to unambiguously designate a successor is not as strange as it appears.

The latent rivalry of followers is forced underground by the leader's huge authority: he implicitly or explicitly forces his lieutenants to submerge their differences in loyalty to the movement or to himself. If he favors someone, his word is unquestionable. And leanings of followers toward a particular element of their master's teachings are prevented from developing far by the leader's authority. With the death of the leader, the latent rivalries suddenly burst to the surface. Thus, for example, Hegelianism split into the Old Hegelian, or rightist, and Young Hegelian, or leftist, movements immediately after the death of Hegel. In composite movements or states, the rivalry among the former leader's lieutenants often attracts the support of different groups of people with different backgrounds, views, or interests. In the case of the Muslim movement, the *Muhajirun*¹⁸ or followers of Muhammad who had left hostile Mecca for Medina in 622, the *Ansar* who had joined Muhammad in Medina, and the most prestigious clans of the Meccan *Quraysh* tribe who joined him only after his conquest of Mecca formed three very different groups who had advocates among his now orphaned lieutenants, all of whom were initially *Muhajirun*. Finally, when Muhammad

¹⁸ A Muhajir is someone who makes a *hijra* -- exodus or migration -- like Muhammad's from Mecca to Medina, following the example of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt; sometimes the place of refuge is also called a *hijra*. Most often the word has the connotation of a Muslim who leaves an infidel place for a Muslim area. Many Islamic jurists regard it as a religious duty to do so.

became the ruler of a state -- in Medina -- opportunists began to join the earlier group of convinced and dedicated Muslims, and there were more and more of these as the Muslim Caliphate rapidly expanded to Mecca, then to the rest of Arabia, and finally into a vast empire extending from Libya to Uzbekistan whose territories were lucrative conquests for anyone in power.

The Opportunist Following Brought by Power

How a movement deals with opportunists when it begins to be successful, and particularly when it acquires power over a political community, is another important structural determinant of change toward moderation or radicalization. Tolstoy immortalized these opportunists in his description of nine parties or factions in the Emperor's camp who differed about how Russia should fight Napoleon in 1812:

The eighth and largest group, which in its enormous numbers was to the others as ninety-nine to one, consisted of men who desired neither peace nor war, neither an advance nor a defensive camp at the Drissa or anywhere else, but only the one most essential thing—as much advantage and pleasure for themselves as possible.... All the men of this party were fishing for rubles, decorations, and promotions, and in this pursuit watched only the weathercock of imperial favor, and directly they noticed it turning in any direction, this whole drone population of the army began blowing hard that way....¹⁹

Tolstoy exaggerates the preponderance of the opportunists, and knew it, but my experience of US government officials at the level of assistant secretary suggested it was a majority. Of course, the case of early Islam we consider was very different. Here the opportunists were calculating their advantage amidst the excitements of a new religion which made thrilling appeals. But if the opportunists were fewer, they were also more alien to the body of religious enthusiasts, who were filled with the discovery of the right path. The result must have been somewhat as described by Macaulay in the case of the Puritans:

¹⁹ Lev Tolstoy, *Voyna i Mir*, Volume II, Part 1.

The general fate of sects is to obtain a high reputation for sanctity while they are oppressed, and to lose it as soon as they become powerful: and the reason is obvious. It is seldom that a man enrolls himself in a proscribed body from any but conscientious motives. Such a body, therefore, is composed, with scarcely an exception, of sincere persons.... But, when a sect becomes powerful, when its favor is the road to riches and dignities, worldly and ambitious men crowd into it, talk its language, conform strictly to its ritual, mimic its peculiarities, and frequently go beyond all its honest members in all outward indications of zeal. No discernment, no watchfulness, on the part of ecclesiastical rulers, can prevent the intrusion of such false brethren. The tares and the weeds must grow together. Soon the world begins to find out that the godly are not better than other men, and argues, with some justice, that, if not better, they must be much worse. In no long time all those signs which were formerly regarded as characteristic of a saint are regarded as characteristic of a knave.²⁰

Thus the intrusion of the opportunists was bound to add suspicion to the discord among the groups of the faithful and to expose their leaders to doubt from the general population of Muslims. In response, extremist attempts to restore the integrity of the faith can arise. But to see these effects, we need to return to the unfolding events under the first three Caliphs.

The first three Caliphs

According to reports written much later, Abu Bakr adopted the ambitious title *Khalifat Rasul Allah*, translated both as “Successor to the Messenger of God” and, more plausibly, as “Deputy to....,” the origin of the English word “Caliph.” He tended to favor his Quraysh tribe, most of whom had adopted Islam late. But he was already old when he

²⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The Works of Lord Macaulay: History of England*, (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1898), Vol. 1, Ch. 2, pp. 173-174. In applying these generalizations to Islam, one would have to acknowledge the distinction that Christianity emphasizes more the inner conscience, Islam (like Judaism) conformity to the divine law. But soon the Islamic Caliphate began to appoint men who violated the Law. One of the early governors in Iraq became known for drunkenly vomiting on the pulpit as he gave the Friday sermon.

became ruler, and lived only two years.²¹ He chose ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, a leading follower of Muhammad, as his successor. ‘Umar supplemented the title Caliph with a more monarchical title which became traditional until 1923, and which extremist Muslims are now trying to revive: *amir al-mu’minin*, or “Commander of the Faithful.” ‘Umar was accepted by ‘Ali, which weakens the Shi’ite case. The new Caliph attempted to broaden the basis of the Caliphate by spreading important offices more widely and also by consulting with prominent Muslims about affairs of state. He also established the principle that Muslims were to share in the wealth of the increasingly vast conquered lands proportionally to the time of their adoption of Islam, a principle returned to by many founders of ruling movements like Lenin and Hitler. So our image of a Caliph as an absolute ruler trailed by his executioner, like Harun al-Rashid in the *Arabian Nights*, applies very poorly to the first half-dozen Caliphs, who probably ruled more like Arab Sheikhs, by consultation with influential men among their people. Before he was killed by an assassin ten years later, ‘Umar had established an electoral council to choose the next Caliph. It included several of the possible claimants, including ‘Ali and ‘Uthman. According to some later reports, ‘Ali refused, with typical independence and scrupulousness, the Caliphate under preconditions that would have limited his freedom. As a result, ‘Uthman was elected.

‘Uthman’s election brings us to the habits distinguishing the post-Soviet elite. Being a member of the noble and wealthy Umayya clan of Quraysh, ‘Uthman immediately began to reward his relatives extravagantly and to give them public lands, the common property of the Muslims according to the regulations made by ‘Umar. His actions were rendered more controversial by the fact that the most of the other Ummayyads had been determined opponents of Muhammad and the new religion revealed to him. It seemed as though the Caliphate was falling into the hands of opportunists who were actually old enemies of Islam. Muhammad’s favorite wife ‘A’isha, daughter of the first Caliph, brought to the mosque a piece of his hair, his cloak and a sandal and shouted out, “How quickly have you all

²¹ For the history of the first three Caliphs I largely follow the recent work, respectful of the late Muslim sources, of Wilfred Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28-140, although it might be regarded as pro-Shi’ite.

abandoned the practice [*sunna*] of the prophet when his hair, his dress, and his sandal have not yet rotted.”²²

At this moment it was ‘Ali who stepped forward as the defender of the purity of the religious law established by Muhammad. He insisted on enforcing harsh religious punishments (including the flogging of the Caliph’s brother for drinking wine), protested ‘Uthman’s changes in the ritual prayer, and protected persecuted companions of Muhammad from the Caliph’s anger.²³ These reports, if they are correct, suggest that regardless of the original nature of ‘Ali’s claim to the Caliphate, he (and presumably his party) prided themselves on greater religiosity both in ethical and legal matters.

To understand ‘Ali’s subsequent actions we must remember not only what he did, but what he *did not* do during the 24 years he lived as a disappointed aspirant to Muhammad’s succession. Regardless of whether the original dispute was confined to the question of who should rule, as most Western scholars traditionally have argued, ‘Ali’s exclusion from political power and generalship must have driven him back on spiritual resources, to contemplation and the elaboration of the Muslim faith. His actions against ‘Uthman in adhering more strictly to religious law were the expression not only of ‘Ali’s personality and convictions, but of his situation. If he was truly convinced that he was Muhammad’s choice, he must have thought long and hard about why this choice was disappointed, which may have affected his understanding and presentation of Islamic doctrine. If ‘Ali’s followers were anything like those of other disappointed aspirants to leadership, they must have come to him urging more vigorous efforts to claim a political role or undermine the three Caliphs who reigned before him. To answer them, ‘Ali had to evolve an account of why the correct claimant to the leadership had been set aside without giving up his inherent right, coming from the Prophet and from God. In other words, it is quite possible that ‘Ali in his exile from politics may have *begun* the line of thinking that culminated much later in the series of ideas that explains why an Imam sometimes rises to claim his proper role and sometimes waits and accepts illegitimate rule, or is “withdrawn from the eyes of men” by physical absence (the

²² Madelung, *Succession*, 101, but modified, from Ahmad al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, ed. S. D. F. Goitein, (Jerusalem, 1936), 48-49, 88-89.

²³ Madelung, *Succession*, 108-109.

doctrine of “occultation,” *ghayba*²⁴). Perhaps these reasonings explain why, when the disputed succession came to fighting, some on the other side spoke of a “religion of ‘Ali.”²⁵

Opposition to the Caliph ‘Uthman now reached such a pitch that, according to the much later historian Tabari, he was stoned by the worshippers while delivering his Friday sermon.²⁶ Such incidents, if rightly reported, suggest that ‘Uthman had lost the support of the majority of prominent Muslims present in the capital. Three groups of rebels began moving toward Medina, and those from the army in Egypt surrounded ‘Uthman’s palace. Ali, although blamed by ‘Uthman and his partisans for organizing the protests, played a typically scrupulous or perhaps indecisive role, reproaching the Caliph but trying to restrain the rebels. The men from Egypt and the defenders of the palace clashed, ‘Umar ordered his followers to leave him, and he was murdered while reading the Koran with his wife. He had no army to defend him, a fact that underlines how different the *‘umma* or Muslim community was from the later despotic Caliphates and from the modern state. The murder of the leader of the community by armed rebels, only twenty-four years after the Prophet, was certain to generate bitter animosities that split the Muslim community down the middle. It had been fundamental to the Qu’ran and Muhammad that there is one Muslim community, and that this community is political.²⁷ But in Arab culture, a murder must be revenged, and doing so is an obligation of kinfolk and tribesmen. These competing and confusing obligations tore the young and fragile community apart. As Wellhausen says,

The murder of ‘Uthman was more epochmaking than almost any other event of Islamic history. From that time the question to whom the leadership of the theocracy belonged was fought out with the sword.²⁸

“In an emotionally tense and confused atmosphere, ‘Ali was acclaimed as the new Caliph in Medina,” as a careful Shi’i scholar puts it.²⁹ For contemporary “Twelver” Shi’ites,

²⁴ I have drawn on the definition in Farhad Daftary’s useful glossary, in *The Isma’ilis: their History and Doctrine*, Second Edition, (Cambridge, 2007), Afterwards Isma’ilis 2,516.

²⁵ Madelung, *Succession to Muhammad*, 178, citing Tabari, Ibn Durayd and Ibn Abi Shayba. There are references, but much fewer, on the other side to a “religion of ‘Uthman.”

²⁶ Tabari, Part I, 2979.

²⁷ See Surah 2 of the Qu’ran.

²⁸ Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 50.

a leading expert on Shi'ism writes that “‘Ali’s short Caliphate...has been the only legitimate reign experienced by the Islamic community since the death of the Prophet.”³⁰ At the time, however, ‘Ali’s right to rule was contested. Many Quraysh tribesmen, led by Muhammad’s wife ‘A’isha and the eminent companions of Muhammad Talha and Zubayr, refused to accept ‘Ali’s authority. Syria, under the longtime governor Mu’awiya from the Umayyad clan, also refused to accept the authority of ‘Ali. The dissidents in Mecca were the first to gather tribesmen against ‘Ali. Talha and al-Zubayr were, as males, the military leaders, but the tribesmen are reported as saying, “We are not going to leave the household of the Messenger of God (meaning the Mother of the Faithful [‘A’isha]) for anything!”³¹ Thus the conflict for the Caliphate was at that point between parties both associated with Muhammad’s household, which did not then mean, as in later Shi’ite usage, the blood relatives of Muhammad. The forces of ‘A’isha, Talha, and Zubair fought ‘Ali’s fighters outside Basra in the famous “Battle of the Camel,” and were routed. Now only Mu’awiya in Syria opposed ‘Ali’s rule. With his typical scrupulousness, ‘Ali let most of the prisoners go after they gave him their oaths of allegiance, but his first words to the conquered Basrans were, typically, to chastise them for turning against him. On returning to Kufa, his supporters’ base, he refused to stay in the Governor’s palace, calling it a “castle of corruption.”³² The impression that we get of ‘Ali is of a man of deep faith and great scrupulousness, to the point of hurting his political chances. A critic of ‘Ali could ask whether this scrupulousness did not go along with a certain unconscious hypocrisy because he never reproved or punished the murderers of ‘Uthman; he depended on their support.

The Community Split Three Ways

The Battle of Siffin

²⁹ Farhad Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), afterwards Isma’ilis, 43. I used both the first and second editions.

³⁰ Heinz Halm, *Shi’ism*, second ed., tr. Janet Watson and Marian Hill, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9.

³¹ Tabari I, 3177, tr. by Adrian Brockett, Vol. XVI, based upon Sayf ibn ‘Umar; cf. Madelung, *Succession*, 167.

³² Madelung, *Succession*, 179-183, chiefly from Baladhuri and Minqari.

After much maneuvering for position, the two disorderly hosts led by ‘Ali and Mu’awiya met at Siffin on the Euphrates, in Western Iraq.³³ For over two months the two groups exhorted and negotiated with each other, showing a reluctance to divide the Muslim community and settle their differences by the sword.

When the sun went down ending the holy month of Muharrem, in the thirtieth-seventh year after Muhammad’s founding of the Muslim religious polity (July 18, 657), ‘Ali ordered the struggle for the mastery of the Islamic Empire to begin. The consequences of this battle were to be decisive for the whole subsequent development of Shi’ism. After several days of Homeric war -- mainly threats, insults and single combats -- a bloody battle began. After several days ‘Ali’s side was apparently gaining an advantage when Mu’awiya’s leading forces raised copies of the Qu’ran on their lances, symbolizing an appeal to the divine judgment that the two sides acknowledged equally. As Mu’awiya’s advisors had hoped, this gesture divided ‘Ali’s partisans. He wanted to keep fighting, but some leaders of the “Readers [of the Qu’ran]” who had fought most fiercely for him were touched by the appeal to religious authority. ‘Ali yielded, agreeing to an arbitration in which Mu’awiya’s representative was partisan while his own was neutral. The very fact of the arbitration and its language tended to put ‘Ali -- acknowledged as the Caliph everywhere but in Syria -- and the provincial governor Mu’awiya on the same level; it was the first of many errors of judgment made by ‘Ali in the course of a difficult struggle.

On the march back to Kufa many of ‘Ali’s followers, apparently including some who had been impressed by the raising of the Qur’an and demanded to halt the fighting, had second thoughts about the truce and the arbitration “on the grounds that there should be no negotiation over what is right.”³⁴ Their slogan, constantly repeated over many rebellions, was “No judgment except God’s.” With typical Bedouin *legerete*, they now veered toward the view that to stop the fighting and submit to human arbitration was to deny God his right to decide the issue through fighting. About 12,000 of ‘Ali’s men left him and camped

³³ For these events see al-Tabari, 21-98 (largely from Abu Mikhnaf); Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 77-83; Madelung, *Succession*, 211-244; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2 Ed., (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004), 77-79, a clear summary.

³⁴ Khalid Blankenship, in Tim Winter, *the Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, 36.

separately, rejoined him, and then defected again, declaring that they could no longer live in Kufa, an unjust city.³⁵ Finally they set up their own Imam or Caliph, Abdullah ibn Wahb al-Rasibi, who was nicknamed after the calluses on his forehead and hands from incessant prayer beyond religious requirements.³⁶ These defectors from Ali's side were the beginning of the Muslim school or sect that later became known as the Khawarij or Kharijites, from the verb *kharaja*, to go out or secede. They themselves apparently first called themselves *shurat*, people who sell, from the commitment or sale of their souls wholly to God. They survive today only in the form of the Ibadites, their most moderate wing, in Oman, the Tunisian-Libyan border area, and the Algerian Sahara. So moderation led to a split and the emergence of extremism. The disagreement and fighting between 'Ali's partisans and the Kharijites should not obscure the fact that both currents of opinion objected to the dominant elements of Muslim society under the first Caliphs.

It is clear that at this crucial point in Islamic history that it is not the Shi'ites but the Kharijites who represented the most extremist Islamic current of opinion. (The Kharijites deserve further study, and I speak of them here only to define the alternatives clearly.) As Moroney puts it:

They were militant, fundamentalist, homicidal, and suicidal: they were likely to raise the *tahkim* [their slogan]...in a crowded *masjid* [mosque] and be instantly torn to pieces by the panicked crowd.³⁷

The homicidal and suicidal aspects remind of today's Salafi or "Wahhabi" terrorists, and a quick look at the internet will show that the accusation of neo-Kharijism is constantly attached today to jihadist Muslims, an accusation that they have not always denied.³⁸ The

³⁵ Baladhuri, *Ansab*, II, 359 and Madelung, *Succession*, 251.

³⁶ Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 84. Compare Patricia Crone, "The Kharijites and the Caliphal Title," in *Studies in Islamic Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Norman Calder*, ed. Hawting, J. A. Mojaddedi, and A. Samely.

³⁷ Moroney, *Iraq*, 472. M. A. Shaban's idiosyncratic view of the Kharijites (*Islamic History: A New Interpretation*, I, 76-77, 78, 96-99, 103-04, 106-09) as two different groups of rebels, neither of whom were religious dissidents, and the second without religious motives, is contradicted by source after source and is a monument to the difficulty of modern scholars in understanding religion.

³⁸ Interview with Dr. Abdou Filali Ansari, London, December 3, 2008.

most extreme group of Kharijites, the Azrakis, differed from the others in affirming the rightness of killing the women and children of the other Muslim groups. The early Kharijites differed from other Muslims in freely making the accusation of *takfir*, that someone who declares himself a Muslim is not one—something carefully avoided by most Muslims from Muhammad to the present, but much loved by today’s Jihadist terrorists.

‘Ali went after the outnumbered Kharijites, killing a great number, but as the historian Abu Ja’far ibn Jarir al-Tabari reports,

After ‘Ali had slain the people at al-Nahrawan, many came out in opposition to him. His outlying provinces rebelled against him....³⁹

The reaction to ‘Ali’s attempt to crush the Kharijites gives evidence that their sympathizers were a large part of his following, and that those personally devoted to him or to the family of the Prophet were not a large group. As the prominent authority Wilferd Madelung, who has mounted the greatest modern effort to discern the Shi’ite position about ‘Ali’s right to the Caliphate, writes:

‘Ali’s rule, to be sure, had not gained popularity in Kufa during his lifetime. The loyalist following that he built up during the final years of his reign ... remained a small minority. The town was deeply divided in its attitude toward him.⁴⁰

Madelung convincingly argues that ‘Ali ought to have tried harder to recover the support of these fanatics, difficult as it would have been.⁴¹ The Kharijite secession split the most religious Muslims, while the opportunists increasingly flocked to Mu’awiya, who never reproached them and knew how to reward them. This split will serve to introduce a mechanism that works to moderate movements that are in power: the principled people are more likely to split, the opportunists less likely, giving them a preponderance. This

³⁹ Tabari 3430, tr. G.R. Hawting, citing ‘Umar b. Shabbah.

⁴⁰ Madelung, *Succession*, 309.

⁴¹ Madelung, *Succession*, 261-62.

mechanism may be more likely to operate in religious movements, because the passions they stir are deeper.

Between ‘Ali and Mu’awiya hostilities were postponed to await an arbitration, for which purpose ‘Ali appointed a representative who was by no means committed to him. On the arbitration the sources are hopelessly confused, but the outcome was less favorable to ‘Ali than to Mu’awiya, further shredding his declining support. After defeating the Kharijites ‘Ali hoped to march against Mu’awiya, but his men “slipped away from their camp... apart from a few of their leaders, and the camp was left empty. When ‘Ali saw that ... his idea of departing to fight Mu’awiya was shattered.”⁴²

Seeing that ‘Ali was losing followers, Mu’awiya had himself proclaimed Caliph, and ‘Ali cursed him as he began the predawn prayer in the mosque: “Oh God, put a curse on Mu’awiya...” Mu’awiya followed in kind.⁴³ This was the beginning of the Shi’ite cursing of erroneous Caliphs, soon extended to the first three “rightly guided” Caliphs. This marks one of the few ritual differences between Sunnis and Shi’ites. It marks the definitive split of the Muslim community into factions which hated each other more than they hated unbelievers. Soon, Mu’awiya had wrested control over Egypt and a large part of southern and western Arabia from ‘Ali. A decisive struggle for control of Iraq was imminent when Ibn Muljam, a Kharijite seeking to avenge his comrades killed by ‘Ali at Nahrawan, killed the Commander of the Faithful with a poisoned sword in the mosque at Kufa. Of the four successors to Muhammad, three had died by violence.

Many Muslims who were not Shi’ites and many unbelievers have been attracted by the personality of ‘Ali, and it is easy to be so. Among opportunists and those whose undoubted religious zeal seems to have invariably reinforced whatever their inclinations were, ‘Ali was a man of real religious seriousness. In ‘Ali, deep faith seems to have been combined with a capacity for self-examination and generosity that is rare among religious leaders or politicians. This trait sometimes led ‘Ali to act against his political interests.

⁴² Tabari I, 3385-3386, tr. Hawting.

⁴³ Tabari I, 3360, and Madelung, *Succession*, 257, citing al-Minqari.

Unfortunately, ‘Ali made many errors of judgment in his final struggle with Mu’awiya, complex and difficult as the struggle was. It seems that ‘Ali’s very virtues contributed to his ultimate failure. ‘Ali was the first representative of a major theme of Shi’ism for which we might use Ivan Morris’ term “the nobility of failure,” though he applied it to Japanese history. ‘Ali’s life suggests that the greatest human qualities lead characteristically to political defeat and failure—a theme tremendously developed in later Shi’ism. While it is characteristic of Shi’ism, this view is understandable in many contexts. The rulers and generals that we remember as particularly splendid heroes are often those who ultimately failed, or died before doing the boring work of institutionalizing and ruling their conquests: Alexander, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, the Emperor Frederick II, King Richard the Lion-Hearted, St. Louis, Joan of Arc, King Charles XII of Sweden, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Napoleon, and Abraham Lincoln. The meteor-like trajectory of these figures seems to make their charms more brilliant for us.

Hasan’s Rule and Abdication

When ‘Ali died, his eldest son, Hasan, proclaimed himself Caliph in Kufa and was sworn the oath of fealty by thousands of people there. The modern Shi’ite scholar S. H. M. Jafri reasonably comments:

Hasan’s spontaneous selection after the death of ‘Ali also indicated Iraqi inclinations, though in vague terms, towards the legitimate succession to the leadership of the community in the line of ‘Ali....[T]he people of Iraq...were quite clear in distinguishing the line of the Prophet through Fatima [Muhammad’s daughter] from other members of the Hashimite clan [Muhammad’s extended family], otherwise they would have chosen, for example, ‘abd Allah b. al-‘Abbas, who was a cousin of the Prophet, was senior in age to Hasan and was experienced in affairs of state, having been ‘Ali’s governor in Basra.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ S. H. M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi’a Islam*, (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1990). Jafri’s book, originally published in 1979, gives the fullest account of Hasan. Heinz Halm, currently the most renowned Western expert on Shi’ism, gives this book as an example of accounts that “are more like testimonies of belief than academic studies” (*Shi’ism*, Second Edition, translated by Janet Watson and Marian Hill, [New

Hasan is considered by all the existing Shi'ite groups to have been the second Imam and to have remained so until his death, in spite of his abdication. The sources on Hasan are confused, but they indicate a continued reluctance to fight for the house of 'Ali on the part of large number of Iraqis, even in his capital, and considerable ambivalence on his own part about fighting Mu'awiya for the Caliphate. The muddled sources leave it unclear to what extent this attitude was born of his unreliable support and to what extent of his own character. Hasan had defended the Caliph 'Uthman against the rebels, in opposition to his father's own position.

The upshot of Hasan's reign was that he was abandoned by most of his mutinous troops as Mu'awiya advanced and was harassed and wounded by Kharijites.⁴⁵ He finally abdicated his position as leader of the community in return for promises from Mu'awiya that, according to most of the traditions, included all the money in the treasury at Kufa and the revenue of a Persian province for life.⁴⁶ Hasan then gave homage to Mu'awiya and retired to a luxurious life in Medina, which was becoming the center of the wealthy and self-indulgent aristocracy of the descendants of prominent early Muslims.

Hasan's life certainly does not shine with the heroic flashes of his father 'Ali or his brother Husayn, who next inherited the Shi'ite cause. The easiest interpretation for non-Shi'ites is that Hasan was a coward who preferred a life of ease to an uphill struggle to secure the Caliphate he believed to be rightly his. It is clearer that Hasan, like an enormous number of Muslims in this period, still set a high value on peace and unity within the Muslim community and, like his more heroic relatives, was willing to sacrifice for it. But Hasan's history is not merely personal; it illustrates a duality within early Shi'ism that was sometimes played out in the lives of individual Imams and sometimes in the contrasting agendas of alternative Imams or lines of Imams. 'Ali himself had claimed the Caliphate after the death

York: Columbia University Press, 2004], 4.) Why should belief in a religion disqualify someone from understanding it? Jafri could reply that scholars who are not personally moved by any religion—the majority of those today—are like deaf people trying to understand music.

⁴⁵ Jafri, *Origins*, 144, 145.

⁴⁶ Madelung (*Succession*, 311-324) scarcely justifies his skepticism about the monetary conditions mentioned by all the sources except Ibn A'tham. For the conditions in various sources see Jafri, *Origins*, 148-153.

of Muhammad but had eventually yielded to 'Umar's choice of Abu Bakr. He had accepted 'Umar to the extent that he agreed to be part of an electoral council to choose the next Caliph. When he was not elected, he opposed the actions of 'Uthman but apparently tried to restrain the rebels against him. When 'Uthman was murdered, he accepted or claimed the Caliphate, but yielded to the arbitration. Of 'Ali's two sons by Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, Hasan became a compromiser while Husayn emerged as a fearless claimant to the rights of the Prophet's family by force of arms. So we can say that early Shi'ism, itself more moderate than Kharijism, contained contending tendencies towards a moderate stance and a more extreme one. As time went on, these two tendencies were to be enshrined in formal doctrine and in different schools of Shi'ism.

The Second Civil War among Muslims

Mu'awiya, the first Umayyad Caliph, died in the nineteenth year of his successful reign, 60 years after the Prophet's flight to Medina -- A.D. 680 by the Christian calendar. Before his death, he had arranged, against much resistance, for the succession of his pleasure-loving son Yazid. As Wellhausen remarks perceptively, "the ruling power ... according to Islam ... was not a human possession ... to which men could assert their rights as heirs." This widespread reaction goes far to explain the revolts that faced Yazid, who lived only four years, and his young son Mu'awiya II, who was acknowledged as Caliph only in Syria.⁴⁷ The Umayyad adoption of hereditary rule, as Shaban⁴⁸ points out, made the descendants of 'Ali and of Muhammad through Fatima much more dangerous to the ruling dynasty because they came from a nobler line of descent.

The arrival of hereditary succession among the Umayyads triggered what will remind students of Russian history of the *smutnoye vremya* or Time of Troubles that preceded the Romanovs, distinguished by the disintegration of Umayyad power even in Syria and a sort of multi-party civil war waged by Umayyads, representatives of the old Muslim establishment in Arabia, Kharijites, Shi'ites, and Arab tribes, who fought with and conquered each other.

⁴⁷ Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 162.

⁴⁸ M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), vol. I, 91.

The scholar who best recognized the distinctiveness of this troubled period, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, dates it from 680 to 692, but the Azraki Kharijites (the most extreme of the extreme) were not subdued until 699.⁴⁹ Many of Mu'awiya's own governors did not say his wastrel son's name in the Friday sermon, a classical Islamic way of recognizing the sovereign. The second and third and fourth Umayyad Caliphs in the traditional list, Mu'awiya II and Marwan, were never acknowledged in most of the Muslim realm.⁵⁰ As Hodgson notes,

It was the Kharijis who succeeded in controlling the largest extent of territory, although they did not control any of the important garrison towns.⁵¹

He likewise rightly emphasizes that Ibn al-Zubayr, usually considered a rebel, "was in fact the nearest to an effective successor of Yazid's power, or at least to his status."⁵² Ibn al-Zubayr seems to have been acknowledged by more governors and more of the elite in the garrison cities than his rivals; even in Damascus, the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, and in most of Syria he was widely acknowledged.⁵³ This deep crisis in the Umayyad regime suggests that traditional Islamic historiography is right that the dynasty, with a few exceptions, was perceived as composed of irreligious opportunists who had usurped Muhammad's rule; that is emphatically the Shi'ite view.

The Revolt of 'Ali's Son Husayn

After Yazid's accession, the first rebel to emerge was Husayn, the second son of 'Ali, who refused to pay homage to Yazid. Husayn set out northwards from Mecca with a tiny force, traditionally counted as 18 relatives and 32 followers, plus unnecessary women and children, to raise rebellion in Kufa, the center of his father's following, against the godless hereditary dynasts. Husayn was clearly as intransigent and adventurous as his brother was

⁴⁹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 1: 219-223. The vast extent of anti-Umayyad dominance in this period can best be seen visually in Hodgson's table of events (220) and in the maps in the very illuminating *Tuebingen Atlas des Vorderen Asiens*, afterwards *TAVO*, maps B VII 3.1 and 3.2.

⁵⁰ Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 171, 175; Kennedy, 90.

⁵¹ Hodgson, *Venture*, 222.

⁵² Hodgson, *Venture*, 221n7.

⁵³ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, Second ed., 90-91.

cautious and peace-loving. He had been encouraged to rise up against the Umayyads by supporters of his family's claims in Kufa, but their leaders were rounded up and killed well before he was in the vicinity. Thus, as Heinz Halm expresses it, "Of the thousands of 'partisans' that supposedly existed in Kufa, not a single one came to the aid of the grandson of the Prophet."⁵⁴ Husayn, already warned of his risk according to some traditions, was met by an Umayyad army which kept him away from Kufa and from the river valley until his small band was desperate with thirst. The Umayyad general demanded homage to Yazid as Caliph; when Husayn refused he was attacked and all the males of his little band killed except one, his fourth son, a small child who had been left sick in the tent. The heads of the party, all relatives of the late Caliph 'Ali and many of them of the Prophet as well, were cut off and ceremonially presented to the governor of Iraq, who is said to have mauled Husayn's head with his staff. Then they were sent on to the Caliph Yazid in Damascus for a similar ceremony.

Even though he had long expected aid from Kufa, an obvious question is why Husayn rebelled with so small a group when his father had not been very successful with an army numbering in the thousands. Husayn may have expected supernatural aid. He may have regarded the fight as a religious obligation regardless of its chance of success, in the manner of the Kharijites who likewise opposed the Umayyads for religious reasons and sometimes joined the armies of 'Ali and his sons. Husayn may also have felt that this was the last chance to stop the distortion of Islam by a neo-pagan dynasty and to restore the rule of Muhammad's household. Similarly, in 1745, the son of the Stuart pretender to the English throne, Bonnie Prince Charlie, invaded Britain with seven men even though the promised French troops failed to arrive, because he must have felt that, fifty-seven years after the Stuarts were deposed, it was the last chance.

S. H. M. Jafri, a pious Shi'ite, skillfully defends a third possibility rooted in traditional Shi'ite accounts but which deserves consideration.⁵⁵ This is that Husayn

⁵⁴ Heinz Halm, *The Shi'ites, A Short History*, tr. Allison Brown, (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 2007),

⁵⁵ Jafri, *Origins*, 188, 200-204.

deliberately sacrificed himself and his relatives to set an example that would turn Muslims from the disastrous course they were then on:

...from the very beginning Husayn was planning for a complete revolution in the religious consciousness of the Muslims. All of his actions show that he was aware of the fact that a victory achieved through military strength and might is always temporal, because another stronger power can in course of time bring it down in ruins. But a victory achieved through suffering and sacrifice is everlasting and leaves permanent imprints on man's consciousness.⁵⁶

The last phrase displays a weakness of Jafri's interpretation: by interpreting the Shi'ite heroes as predestined martyrs and Shi'ism as an appeal to the sympathy that suffering elicits, he bases himself on later Shi'ite sentiment. But the "nobility of failure" theme is one that became firmly identified with Twelver Shi'ism only by repeated losses. It seems unhistorical to regard it as dominant from the very beginning in the way that Christianity was identified with suffering and sacrifice by the Crucifixion. Muhammad was a great ruler, a success; so was 'Ali at the beginning of his Caliphate. There is every historical indication that 'Ali, Hasan, and perhaps Husayn were struggling to restore the unity of the Muslim community by triumphing over the deviant Muslims with the sword.

Nevertheless, Husayn's struggle marks a turning point in the historical development of Shi'ism by associating it with the nobility of failure. There are a number of figures of history and legend who deliberately sacrificed their lives to establish something or were interpreted as doing so by intelligent tellers of their stories: Samson, Achilles, Socrates, Jesus, Julius Caesar according to some indications of Shakespeare, as well as many of the Old Bolsheviks who confessed to crimes they did not commit in Stalin's show trials, and still more of today's Wahhabi jihadists. Abraham Lincoln deliberately gave the Civil War a character of redemptive suffering in his Second Inaugural Address, at which point he had just won the war. He was at the peak; the frustrating problems of Reconstruction could only have

⁵⁶ Jafri, *Origins*, 202.

dimmed his reputation and confused the nobility of that war as a second American Revolution. He went to the public theater and sent away his bodyguard. It was Good Friday.

As regards Husayn, whether his march to Kufa was a brave rebellion in the face of the odds or a deliberate sacrifice to redeem true Islam, it has to be seen in the context of this study as a turn to a more extreme course, to extremism as we define it here. The discouraging surrender of his rights by his brother with its inevitable depressing effect on their partisans may have motivated Husayn to reassert the family's rights. Struggling universalistic movements faced with hard choices between moderate and extreme courses often show a *tendency to oscillate between these directions*. The disappointing results of restraint can motivate an extreme turn, and the excesses of extremism provoke in turn more limited objectives or more gradual tactics.

Karbala in Shi'ite Memory

The slaying of Muhammad's younger grandson has continuously served to galvanize and replenish the self-identity and world-view of Shi'i Islam. The clay of Karbala unceasingly leaves its impress on the face of the Shi'a, from the moment that Husayn uttered his final prayer on its sands until now. For the Shi'a, all of history is stained by the blood spilt at Karbala.⁵⁷

These words express well the tremendous impact of Husayn's death, with his handful of companions, at Karbala. At the time, for the Caliph Yazid and for his governors and supporters it was a mere incident, no military threat in comparison with the vast and long-enduring revolts of ibn al-Zubayr and of the Kharijites. But, as Wellhausen says,

⁵⁷ Douglas Karim Crow, "The Death of al-Husayn b. 'Ali and Early Shi'i Views of the Imamate," chapter in Etan Kohlberg, ed., *Shi'ism*, (Ashgate, UK: Variorum, 2003), 41. Crow alludes to the practice of doing the ritual prayers over a baked piece of earth from Karbala or its image in materials such as prayer rugs.

There are such things as events that have a huge effect, not so much through themselves and their inevitable consequences as through the memories they leave in the hearts and minds of men.⁵⁸

The anniversary of the sacrifice of Karbala later became the major religious occasion for Twelver Shi'ites, marked by morose recitations, passion plays, and displays of penitent self-mutilation, leading to the emphasis on tears and repentance that, as V. S. Naipaul observes in *Among the Believers*, is central to Iranian culture and politics. Karbala became one of the two holiest sites specific to Shi'ism, the scene of lachrymose pilgrimages. But these changes took centuries to complete themselves, and go beyond our subject here. They certainly show how a certain extremist act, celebrated in a deepened spirit of extremism, can determine the direction of an entire culture.

The Penitents Movement, 680-684

Following the death of Husayn in 680 some of the Shi'ites living in Kufa who had failed to join felt intense remorse and a desire to somehow atone for it. They secretly formed a movement called the Tawwabun or Penitents. Although they had, according to our dubious sources, extracted some 16,000 pledges of support, only about 4,000 men arrived at the site of the mobilization to set out for Syria to attack the Umayyads. They began the campaign by spending a day and a night weeping at the site of the martyrdom of Karbala. The excessively direct aim of this campaign and the decision to fight even without the expected numbers show the same tendency as Husayn's to interpret politics and war as bearing personal witness to one's convictions, and not as the choice of means appropriate to a goal. This tendency, extreme against the background of Muhammad's successful war-fighting and statesmanship, was characteristic of most early Shi'ism and still remains a major current in it to this day: those very same doomed sacrifices surely inspired the suicidal mass attacks of the Iran-Iraq war. (This is a reason to fear Ahmadinejad's acquisition of nuclear weapons: a huge disaster is not necessarily bad in Shi'ism.) Perhaps predictably, the march of the Penitents ended

⁵⁸ Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, tr. Janet Watson and Marian Hill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14, citing Wellhausen, *Die Oppositionsparteien*, 70.

disastrously on the border of Syria in 684. At this point, Shi'ism was becoming a faith of futile gestures. Already, there was an emphasis on the nobility of failure, on sorrow as the sign of genuine piety, and probably on bitterness towards success, wealth, and power.

The vain sacrifice of the Penitents shows one important path along which extremist movements *react to failure*, an important variable considered in this study. The martyrdom of Husayn, useless from a worldly point of view, encouraged the Penitents not to change course but enact a bigger martyrdom. Extremism, at this point, encouraged extremism, rather than a rebound toward moderation. The result was to weaken the Shi'ite movement as it entered the trials and opportunities that were coming in the second Muslim civil war. But that is not the whole story. Martyrdom stirs the feelings; more and more powerful emotions were evoked by the succession of Shi'ite martyrdoms which accumulated as a reservoir of self-reproaches and resentments which would be a powerful source of energy for future Shi'ite risings. When movements begin to develop along the "nobility of failure" path, they are *liable to sudden reversals* as the psychic energy accumulated by sufferings and suppressed angers explodes in violence.

II: Shi'ism Split: Violence and Quietism

The Revolt of Mukhtar

As Daftary concludes, “the movement of the Tawwabun, representing yet another defeat for the Shi’a, marks the end of what may be regarded as the Arab and unified phase of Shi’ism.” But the Shi’ite sympathizers did not give up. Their revolts are notable not only for their small size and their failure but for their persistence. The sacrifice of the Penitents was followed not by another vain martyrdom but by a much more innovative, daring, and creative Shi’ite effort. As Heinz Halm says of it, “This was the catalyst for a succession of attitudes and concepts that would be fundamental for the later Shi’ia.”⁵⁹ This important and fruitful step in Shi’ite history came thanks to Mukhtar ibn Abi Ubayd, an ambitious man hailing from the contemporaneously powerful Thaqafi tribe but whose sympathies were Shi’ite, living in Kufa.⁶⁰ Mukhtar seems to have reflected on the failure of earlier Shi’ite rebellions and decided that a member of the family of the prophet, an Imam, should be invoked, something the Penitents had not insisted on. Mukhtar raised the flag of revolt in the name of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the son of ‘Ali not by Muhammad’s daughter Fatima -- as the line of Imams of the Twelver Shi’ites were later defined to be -- but by a woman of the Banu Hanifa tribe which produced eminent Kharijite leaders. Clearly, at this time, the “House of the Prophet” was still a vague concept, not yet narrowed in the manner of the existing Shi’ite faiths. Mukhtar gave to Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya the appellation *mahdi*, which now means “messiah” both for Shi’ites and Sunnis but etymologically means only “guided” -- guided rightly and by God, in contrast to the erring Umayyad Caliphs. It is unclear to what extent Mukhtar’s *mahdi* had the modern connotations;⁶¹ his social policy certainly implied that the Mahdi will “fill the earth with justice,” as we will see. For his part, Muhammad ibn Hanifiyya endorsed the rising only ambiguously, if at all, and remained in the Hijaz, so the imperative for bold leadership fell upon Mukhtar himself. Perhaps one can see Mukhtar as

⁵⁹ *Shi’ism*, 16.

⁶⁰ The main source is Tabari II. 598 ff., based on the Shi’ite Abu Mikhnaf, but the revolt of Mukhtar is very obscured by our late sources which express partisan points of view different from his own, and by a lack of Western scholarship.

⁶¹ Compare Halm, *Shi’ism*, 16, and Daftary, 52.

the first of the series of crucial representatives of absent Imams, from the *safirs* or ambassadors of the Imams during the Lesser Occultation (874-941) up to modern Iran's Khomeini, Khamenei, and Ahmadinejad. In any case, the final element that Mukhtar wanted to add to the formula of earlier Shi'ite uprisings a new source of popular support; the Arabs of Kufa who were connected to the family by loyalty or piety had proven sadly fickle.

Mukhtar found this source of support among the non-Arab converts to Islam, or *mawali*. Mawla, from the same root as the *awla*, authority, attributed by Muhammad to 'Ali, most frequently meant at this time a non-Arab convert who had become attached to an Arab tribe as a client, thereby gaining a place in the community. These converts were now an important stratum of society in the Arab garrison cities, some growing wealthy, others ambitious and able, but suffered from systematic discrimination embodied in the structure of the Islamic empire as established by 'Umar and his successors. Islam was a universalistic religion, applying to all peoples: as Hillel Fradkin convincingly argues, this is the meaning of Muhammad's critique of Judaism.⁶² It held the believers equal before God in the most important respect, and all converts were aware of these momentous teachings. But Arabs held all the important and lucrative positions, were entitled to booty in wartime, and received the stipend from the income of state lands in peacetime. The *mawali* had converted from their old religions only to find themselves usually taxed at the same higher rate as the unbelievers. This was a source of explosive discontent which Mukhtar was the first to set aflame. In their desperate struggles, the Kharijites had been the very first to befriend the *mawali*, but none of their leaders had systematically sought to appeal to them. Perhaps Mukhtar grasped that Shi'ism, because of its emphasis on the nobility of suffering, could best make an appeal to the underprivileged.

The transformation begun by Mukhtar was vast; with his appeal to the non-Arabs social justice, in the sense of a reordering of society, entered Islam. From the beginning, Islam and Shi'ism had emphasized the importance of just dealing and of charity in individual ethics, but this did not apparently imply a reordering of society in the name of justice. We see here one of the paths that an extremist movement can take after early failure: With Mukhtar, Shi'ism

⁶² See especially Surah 2 of the Qur'an.

responded to failure by discovering a new doctrinal appeal that made it eventually more successful. Perhaps we could even say it was able to make an appeal for fighting supporters because of Shi'ism's growing obsession with suffering and victimization. An adaptation to military helplessness provided a resource for renewed struggle. Such is the complexity of the paths on which extremisms change.

Mukhtar took his appeal to the non-Arabs seriously, giving them booty and army stipends and appointing as the chief of his elite troops the non-Arab Abu 'Amra Kaysan, an important figure in future Shi'ite development. With much support from old Arab Shi'ites and the new energy of the deprived non-Arabs, he was able to dominate central Iraq and a large part of northwestern Iran for over a year, though it was constantly contested by the Umayyads from Syria (whom he defeated), by Ibn al-Zubayr's brother from Basra, and by the Kharijites from the east. But the principle of ethnic equality within Islam was divisive as well as inspiring. It enraged much the old Arab tribal aristocracy of Kufa, who seceded and joined Ibn al-Zubayr's brother in Basra. With this new support, the followers of the generally accepted Caliph Ibn al-Zubayr moved on Basra and defeated Mukhtar in April 687. Some of Mukhtar's followers fought on briefly in Nisibin. This third effort marked the end of Shi'ite military initiatives during the second Muslim civil war, while the followers of Ibn al-Zubayr and the Kharijites fought on for several years. Early Shi'ism was an energetic and persistent movement, but a weak one.

Rebellion and Caliphate of Ibn al-Zubayr

The second group to rebel, in 681, was comprised of the descendants of Muhammad's old companions in Medina and nearby areas under the leadership of 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, the son of 'Ali's old enemy. Throughout its career, the Caliphate of Ibn al-Zubayr kept its civil and military center in Mecca, Medina and the wider Hijaz, showing its reactionary nature as a movement led by the old Quraysh tribal elite who resented the increasing monopoly of power by the one Umayyad clan who had displaced the center of Islam to alien Syria. From a military point of view, this was a poor choice, because the Hijaz was isolated from the rich and populous new centers of the Islamic empire and relatively poor; it could not

feed itself. Yazid send forces to crush Ibn al-Zubayr; they captured and plundered Medina, the Prophet's chosen city, and were sacrilegiously besieging the Kaaba itself when Yazid died. It was at this point that most prominent Muslims, perhaps shocked by these events, seem to have abandoned the Umayyads; confusion was the fundamental reality but the majority seemed to gravitate to Ibn al-Zubayr. By 684, he was eventually accepted as Caliph by most provincial governors and dominated the Middle East except for southern Syria, Najd in the center of Arabia, and Khuzistan (the Iranian "oil patch" today) and the adjoining Zagros mountains and the east beyond the desert.⁶³ In this crisis, the survival of the Umayyads as rulers depended on their kinsmen from one Arab tribe of the steppes and one of Yazid's refugee governors. Together they convened some Umayyads in 684 and elected Marwan, a collateral relative of Mu'awiya, as Caliph. Marwan was, according to accounts supported by Tabari and Madelung, smothered by one of his wives after less than a year of rule, bequeathing the Umayyad cause to his son 'Abd al-Malik, who seems to have been more thoughtful than his two predecessors and evolved a new synthesis embodying both extremism and moderation as the basis for Umayyad rule.

Ibn al-Zubayr's career can be described briefly, as he was neither a Shi'ite or a Kharijite. He sent his brother Mus'ab to Iraq, by far the richest province of the empire. But Iraq was also the center of religious dissent, and Mus'ab faced many difficulties, to be described shortly. After surmounting many challenges, he had to face the new Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik advancing on him. Mus'ab was defeated and the Umayyads acknowledged once again in 691. The territory controlled by Ibn al-Zubayr was now limited to the Hijaz. He was trapped in Mecca, which in his religious narrowness he refused to leave, and killed after the inviolable Kaaba was once again attacked and damaged, in October 692. But Abd al-Malik still faced stubborn Kharijite insurgencies in Persia and in Arabia.

The Kharijites

The disorder that mounted after the death of Mu'awiya became the signal, in 684, for the Kharijites to rebel and rapidly conquer vast areas in Arabia and Iran. Before discussing the

⁶³ TAVO, map B VII 3.1.

Kharijite rebellions, I will briefly give a sense of their doctrinal position, which was now beginning to form.

Kharijite law begins with their slogan, the *tahkim*—“No judgment except God’s.” God decides by fighting, or, as also with the Sunnis in principle, by the consensus of the Muslim community. The Kharijites were uncompromising in their ethical demands; the individual who sins, in various competing formulations, is not a Muslim. Consequently, only Kharijites are true Muslims, a position still followed 1,800 years later in Omani chronicles. This position, similar to that of the Wahhabis, is truly extreme in Muslim terms, because the Islamic mainstream has no concept of heresy. Consequently, the early Kharijites were against all other Muslims. They held that rebellion against an unjust Caliph, or someone they did not elect, was not only a right, but a duty. So they were constantly at war; the early Muslim chronicles record Kharijite rebellions almost every year until 900 or so. This doctrine prevented from the start real military strategy, which involves choosing the time and place for combat; it amounts in practice -- though not in theory -- to suicide tactics. (Eventually Kharijites coined the doctrine of *kitman*, an account of history according to which there are phases of militant struggle and phases of waiting.) As a result of Kharijite impatience, they were not successful in toppling the Umayyad or later Caliphates, nor did they create large, enduring states of their own, except in North Africa. Even these began to be overcome by better-organized enemies between 900 and 1000 A.D., gradually leaving Kharijism confined to a few isolated enclaves in Algeria (the Mزاب), Tunisia (Djerba), and Libya (Jabal Nafusa), as well as Oman, the only place under Kharijite rule—but not by a religious Imam. The political fate of Kharijism shows that its extremism ultimately incurred the penalty of failure in terms of its original ambitions.

In accord with its uncompromising demand for moral virtue, a Kharijite community must choose its most virtuous man as *Imam* or Caliph, and the community must depose him if he falls into serious sin; many of their rulers in North Africa were elected and soon thereafter killed. On the run, the Kharijites soon abandoned the expectation that there be only one leader of the *‘umma*, and began to regard it as legitimate that there be several Imams at the same time in different places. The Imam could be any male, “even a black slave,” a far

broader definition than that of the Shi'ites and Sunnis. Kharijites accordingly had great problems in securing stable leadership, with the military consequences one would imagine. But perhaps this attracted to Kharijism peoples such as the Bedouin Arabs and the Berbers of North Africa, whose traditional governance was by democratic assemblies of adult men. The Kharijites were the first to demonstrate the connection between tribal organization and extremist Islam, to be considered shortly.

Some Kharijites rushed to the defense of Mecca against the Umayyad army, showing again that all other points of view tended to unite against the godless Umayyads. Starting from Najd, and capitalizing on their appeal to disorderly and greedy Bedouins impatient with government, the Kharijite rebels led by the Banu Hanif tribesman Najda ibn 'Amir al-Hanifi were able to dominate by 687 two-thirds of Arabia. The distinctive doctrines of the Najadat were that the Qu'ran was enough for believers without the need for an Imam, and that minor sins constituted *shirk* (polytheism) if done consistently, while major sins did not if done only briefly.

The Azraki Kharijites -- followers of another Hanifa Bedouin, Nafi' ibn Azrak -- were the most extreme of the extreme: they held that the women and children of the unbelievers (i.e., non-Kharijite Muslims) could legitimately be killed. Arabia was not a populous area, but the Azraki Kharijites in Iraq and Iran dominated the old urbanized zones and posed a far bigger threat to Ibn al-Zubayr, to the Iraqi Shi'ites, and finally to the Umayyads against whom they were the last rebel holdouts. Their short-term success offers a vivid contrast with much briefer and more localized Shi'ite failures during these years. Beginning in Iraq, they were pushed out into Khuzistan and the adjacent Zagros, which they made their base for attacks on the Muslim encampment of Basra. Nafi' al-Azrak was killed in desperate battle in 685, but his successor Qatari ibn Foja'a succeeded him with the Caliphal title Commander of the Faithful. Under Qatari, the Azraki Kharijites succeeded in dominating a wide area of Luristan and southern Iraq, west to the Euphrates and north to the great city of Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad), also attacking Isfahan unsuccessfully. When pushed out of Khuzistan by Ibn al-Zubayr's forces, they moved east into Fars and the areas to the east of Fars as far as Kirman and Bam. When attacked again by the Umayyads, the area under their

control shrank to Jiruft and the environs. Attempting to break out of this encirclement, Qatari led an expedition to the Caspian coast, as yet unsubdued by Muslims, where he dominated Tabaristan for a time before being overrun in both places in 698.⁶⁴ The remnants of the Kharijites fled to the extreme fringe of the Islamic empire, still fighting. We know that some groups could still be found in Badgis and Gardiz, Afghanistan, three hundred years later. They gradually degenerated into rural bandits.

Thus the Kharijites, beginning with a desire to capture the Islamic heartland and unify the community again, were forced step by step into a military strategy that gave priority to the periphery of Dar al-Islam, an innovation that was to be as momentous for Islamic extremist movements as Mukhtar's discovery of the underprivileged. The Kharijite fighters' long resistance to better organized and wealthier opponents is a testimony to the energy that zeal gave them and to the appeal of extremism to the Bedouin love of plunder, but their ultimate failure came as the result of extremism that was corrected too late by doctrine. It is difficult to be sure from the inadequate sources, but the Kharijites seem to have been peculiarly liable to splits over doctrine, as one might expect from the fact that they privileged the judgment of each Kharijite community.

The nexus between tribal peoples, extremism, and the weak state

The driving of the Kharijite movement towards the periphery reveals an important hypothesis that this study has produced. The potential of Islamic universalistic movements to establish lasting states is limited because they have tended to appeal to tribally organized peoples who resist strong government. Here, "tribally organized" means the social-political organization called by anthropologists "segmentary." In this type of society, there is no state in Weber's sense of a monopoly of the means of coercion. Rather, at every level there is both armed conflict and cooperation depending on the circumstances. As an Arab proverb has it, "I am against my brother, we are together against my uncle, all of us are against the other clans, but the clans unite against other tribes." This form of organization is found both in mountains and in deserts; those who live according to it are often, but not necessarily,

⁶⁴ For the geography of Kharijite conquests, see *TAVO*, map B VII 3.2.

nomads. The distribution of vestiges of former extremist causes in mountains and deserts forms a pattern connecting extremist religion with such areas: Druzes (supporters of the deification of the Fatimid Caliph Hakim) in the mountains of Lebanon, Ibadhis (surviving Kharijites) in Oman, the Mzab oases in the Algerian Sahara and the Jabal Nefusa of Libya, Nuktawis (formerly Zaydi Shi'is) in the Iranian Alborz, Zaydi Shi'is and Isma'ilis in Yemen, Taliban in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. As we saw with the Azraki Kharijites, extremists sometimes arrive in wild peripheral areas because they are chased there. The Najadat Kharijites, however, occupied Najd, al-Hasa, Hadhramaut, and most of Oman because the Bedouin or mountaineers liked their message; it accorded with their more egalitarian social structure and their taste for violence and plundering. When the Ikhwan rebellion in Saudi Arabia was beginning, at the end of the nineteen-twenties, the rebel leader Faisal ibn Darwish protested to the King, in stating their grievances, that they were being prevented from plundering, as true religion permits.

The Importance of Doctrine for Change

We can learn from researching early Islam that *the specific doctrine* followed by an extremist movement makes a huge difference for the rhythm of moderation and radicalism. Early Shi'ism showed a tendency to oscillate between extremes, between hopeless rebellion in the name of principle and quiet inner piety, with sudden and startling reversals of principle (see below). Examples are Hasan's helpless resignation of his Caliphate in contrast to Husayn's desperate rebellion against the odds, Mukhtar's rebellion in contrast with the quiet doctrinal innovation of his successors, and we will see many more striking examples in the subsequent history. 'Ali's own behavior veered between courageous acts of conscience, as when he claimed the Caliphate or whipped the Caliph's brother for drunkenness, and conscientious resignation to the decision of the community, for the sake of its unity. In contrast, the Kharijite current of Islam began as the most extreme, becoming more and more moderate thereafter. Why did these two branches of Islam behave so differently? The force of 'Ali's example, which had both activism and resigned piety within it, must have had some effect. But the most obvious answer, increasingly powerful over time as Shi'ite doctrine became more defined, is the dictatorial authority of the leader—originally of the Imam—in

Shi'ism. Sunnism and Kharijism are religious currents where the Caliph and Muslim doctrine are determined by the consensus of the Islamic community. Shi'ism developed out of the sense that this led believers astray, that the individual believer requires a guiding authority in the person of a member of the Prophet's family, originally an Imam, today a *mujtahid*, the higher authorities among whom are called ayatollahs. Leninism is a similar authoritarian doctrine oscillating between extremes.

Civil Wars from Extremism: Varieties

Having analyzed two successive civil wars within Islam, it is appropriate at this stage to make some policy-relevant categorization and generalization about civil wars involving extremists. Reluctance to fight, the presence of many neutral or vacillating elements in the community, and frequent defections from one side to another are realities in civil wars, themselves a special category among wars. Or more precisely put, these tendencies characterize some kinds of extremist civil wars. One could make a preliminary distinction between six categories of civil wars, with the examples touched on in the case studies undertaken here, or treated separately, distributed among them as follows.

Civil Wars due to the introduction of extremism

- The Fatimid Isma'ili rebellion against the Aghlabid viceroys of the 'Abbasids in North Africa, see below.
- The Safavid uprising.
- The original Hussite uprising against the Emperor and his supporters in Bohemia and Moravia, from 1419.
- Wars between the Protestant and Catholic German cities and princes, especially the Swiss war of 1531, the Schmalkaldic War, 1546, and the German campaigns of 1552-1554.

- The multiple and complex French Wars of Religion.

Civil wars due to splits in movements which are still young and successful

- Early Islam beginning with the assassination of the fourth Caliph ‘Uthman, leading to the First Civil War (‘Ali vs. Mu’awiya vs. Kharijites.)
- The Taborite-Moderate schism among the Hussites after 1419.
- The armed millenarian outbreaks produced by the early Reformation, especially the Peasants’ War of 1524-25 and the Anabaptist clashes of 1533-36.
- The Qarmati Isma’ilis who remained loyal to its original eschatological teaching, vs. the family of the leaders who now revealed a living Mahdi and founded the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa.
- The splits between al-Qa’eda in Iraq and the other Sunni insurgent groups belongs in this category, although it is not studied here.

Wars of reaction against successful extremist movements

- The Kharijite rebellion of Abu Yazid against the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa.
- The Thirty Years’ War, 1618-1648.

Civil Wars that owe their origin predominately to other factors, but strengthen extremism greatly

- The uprisings in the Low Countries against the growing authoritarianism of Spanish colonial rule, 1566-1609.
- The English Civil War, from 1642.

Civil Wars due to a lost international war reviving an existing extremist tradition

- The 1905 Revolution in Russia.
- The October Revolution in Russia.

Civil Wars in response to the decline and failure of earlier extremist movements

- The second civil war in the Islamic community, 680-699.
- The many-sided uprisings that culminated in the ‘Abbasid Revolution, 749-750.

Many civil wars involving extremist movements are characterized by the emergence of new forces or movements. Examples are:

- The Kharijites in the first Islamic civil war, who unexpectedly broke away from ‘Ali’s army and attacked him to form a religious alternative that was powerful for about three hundred years and still survives.
- The Tawwabun, the first Shi’ite movement not led by a member of ‘Ali’s family, and the Shi’ite revolt of Mukhtar, the first movement that developed extremist departures in Shi’ite doctrine such as the coming of a *mahdi* or messiah, in the second Islamic civil war, 680-699.
- The “Independents,” the origin of American Protestant denominations such as the Congregationalists, Unitarians, Baptists and so forth, in the English Civil War. The Independents emerged as the best fighters in the Parliamentary army and were responsible for radicalizing the revolution, executing the King, and bringing Oliver Cromwell to power.
- Likewise, the rural lower-class “clubmen” opposed to both sides in that war.
- A comparable group was the “Greens,” quasi-anarchist peasant bands who fought both the Reds and the Whites in the Russian Civil War, 1918-21.

- The Catholic League, formed in reaction to the rise of Calvinism in the French wars of religion, which came to dominate Northern France under the leadership of the Guise family.
- The “Politique” party, which preferred stability and national unity above either side in the same war, together with the similar party in England that ended the Commonwealth and restored the King in 1661.
- Two recent examples are the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of the Sunni groups against al-Qaeda in Iraq. These developments would not have surprised us if policymakers were aware of the tendency toward “Third Force” movements in civil wars involving extremists.

It is worthwhile to say something about why such “Third Forces” arise in civil wars that involve extremist movements. The contending parties have to evolve, often even to transform themselves, to win the war, because they are not mobilized for war even to the extent that nations with peacetime armies and defense budgets are ready. The dramatic innovations of Mukhtar are examples. Frequently, the sides become more extreme to win a war, as the Kharijites quickly did in the first Muslim civil war, or more extremist minorities show themselves to have more fighting capacity than the less extremist parts of their movements, as happened with the Sea Beggars in the revolt of the Low Countries against Spain or with the Independents in the English Civil War. Moreover, extremism generates counter-extremism: Calvinism generated the Catholic League in the French Wars of Religion, Protestantism the Catholic Counter-reformation, and the Fatimid revolt in North Africa the Kharijite revolt of Abu Yazid. (For some reason that needs to be explored, this action-reaction process seems to have operated less often in the Islamic cases studied.) And extremisms in conflict generally generate a moderate response as well.

In civil wars within new, successful extremist movements and those that foster new extremist movements all these interactions are much more complicated, because the society

is not ready to split or to fissure into multiple fragments. There are many neutral players, many opportunists who will change sides, and many who passionately oppose civil war itself. This accounts for the slow development of civil war, its unexpected turns, the emergence of new factions, and the complicated conspiracies, alliances, and betrayals. In the last phase of the English civil war, the Parliamentary side allied with the Scots to subdue the King, but some so feared the Independents on their own side that they conspired with the King against them, while the King continually tried to ally with the Scots, the Parliamentary Presbyterians, the Independents or the Catholics against all the others. It became a conspiracy of all against all.

Reconstruction of Umayyad Rule

The victorious Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik rebuilt Umayyad rule by playing off the major groups of Arab tribes against each other, by setting up a new garrison city in Iraq inhabited by his own Syrian soldiers, and by centralizing the administration, with an Islamic coinage and Arabic as the language of administration. So his main reform in response to the almost deadly challenges to Umayyad rule was more homage to Islam. But there was a continuing estrangement of the pious from the dynasty, with a few exceptions such as ‘Umar II. The turn towards greater deference for religion somewhat quieted, but did not end, religious dissent from the reigning dynasty, which was further fuelled by the fact that ‘Abd al-Malik did nothing to solve the problem of non-Arab Muslim dissatisfaction. The Kharijites continued to rebel periodically but unsuccessfully. Shi’ism did not produce major revolts for a time, but that emphatically did not mean the end of secret Shi’ite conspiring and hoping. At the beginning the lead was taken by the Kaysanis, led by Mukhtar’s *mawali* military leader Abu ‘Amra Kaysani and disavowed only formally by Ibn Hanifiyya, who seems to have been accepted as Imam by “the overwhelming majority of the Shi’is, both Arabs and *mawali*.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the Shi’ite failure under Mukhtar, with its new emphasis on a *mahdi* and its egalitarian appeal, was so exciting that it caused Shi’ism to become much more extreme—but in a new, *doctrinal* sense. The opening of Shi’ism to non-Arabs also opened it

⁶⁵ Daftary, *Isma’ilis*, 58.

to non-Muslim ideas drawn from the various religions prevailing in Mesopotamia earlier: Christianity, Judaism, Gnosticism, and Zoroastrianism.

The Coming of extremist Theology

When Ibn Hanifiyya died in 700, his followers split. We should note that Shi'ism was even more noted for splits than Kharijism, as we might expect from the importance of descent from 'Ali and, later, from Muhammad through Fatima, as the increasing number of descendants multiplied possible leaders and the pressure of Umayyad persecution led possible leaders to react in different ways. It would be wearisome to describe the various sects, except to note that some of them began to develop teachings already described by their rivals as *ghul'u*: extremism, an important term in Islam. Among these teachings were some that claimed prophethood for their leaders and divinity for their Imams based on the assumption that souls reappear in various bodies, or "metempsychosis," and some that understood the developing Islamic law not to be literally binding on its adherents. These ideas were eventually firmly excluded from Islam's main currents -- Sunni, Shi'ite and Khatijite -- although some were revived by Isma'ilism. But four new radical ideas hitherto outside Islam that appeared after the exciting defeat of Mukhtar and the death of Muhammad ibn Hanifiyya were eventually incorporated into mainstream Shi'ism. These were:

- the idea of a *mahdi* in the messianic sense; a figure who appears or reappears supernaturally at the end of normal history and "fills the earth with justice;"
- the idea of the divinely arranged absence of the Imam, or *ghayba*, usually translated "occultation," a term hardly clearer than the Arabic;
- the idea of his expected return, *raj'a*, as the messiah;
- and the idea that Muhammad and the Imams embody a spark of divine light, separating them from the rest of humanity.

In addition, two very new ideas were not accepted by Twelver Shi'is but were accepted by extreme Shi'ite groups, some (such as the Ahl e-Haqq of southwestern Iran) of which still survive, and by the Isma'ilis:

- the idea that God actualizes his rule in history by cycles of prophets and Imams, each cycle repeating some features of the analogous stage in earlier ones, but adding a more complete revelation;
- and reservations, not clear in the sources, about the binding character of Islamic law for all Muslims at all times.

These are a set of ideas, some of which have tremendous political and military implications, which we will see unfold in the subsequent history. The notion of *ghayba*, or periods when the Imam is absent, functions as a means of moderating extremism, which had manifested itself in the demand for hopeless uprisings in the name of the Imam. But this moderation reigns while its adherents simultaneously wait for an extreme reward: the coming of the messiah, or *Mahdi*, which in Islam is always understood as precipitating an explosion of violence as the messiah frees the world of wickedness. The *Mahdi* is traditionally called “the man with the sword.” Thus the announcement of the arrival of the messiah is a moment which justifies self-sacrificing violence and a tremendous expectation of improvement in life. The very *expectation* of a messiah will change political conduct. Finally, the idea of cyclical sacred history (called by scholars “hierohistory”) vastly complicates the content of God’s revelation, making it less accessible to ordinary people, and opens the way for the tremendously controversial belief that Muhammad is *not* the “seal of all the prophets,” the final religious teacher. Thus there can be a new revelation that supersedes Muhammad’s revelation. Such a revelation would divide its adherents from the rest of the Muslims more sharply than the Kharijites’ beliefs.

The idea of a revolution as an *earthly* redemption fuelled by the suffering of the period before it probably originates at this period of human history, and certainly within Islam. The succession of revolutions since 1776 has made this idea familiar to us. But on thinking about

it, the idea becomes stranger. If you mistreat your child, does that prepare the way for him, after he turns against you, for a totally happy and fulfilled life?

In any case, the fifty years after the death of Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyya was a period of astonishingly rapid growth of new theological doctrines. Ideas about the nature of God, the prophets, and Imams diversified amazingly in this short period. Virtually every major theological idea held by any Shi'i group up to the present was proposed, in its essentials, in those fifty years. It is less clear what provoked this flowering. The failure of a series of extremist rebellions clearly was the trigger, but not the only cause. Underneath there was a temporary transfer of Shi'ite efforts from the politico-military plane to the plane of speculation. This transition is far more characteristic of Shi'ism than of any other branch of Islam, for unclear reasons. It did not happen to the Kharijites.

Given our political and military interests, it is worth saying something about the relation of extremist theology to extremist behavior. Theological eccentricity does not necessarily make groups dangerous. On the contrary, as the scholar Matti Moosa points out, the present-day descendants of the extreme Shi'ites (groups such as the "Alawis" or Nusairis of coastal Syria, the Yazidis and Shabaks of northern Iraq, the Druzes of Lebanon, and the Ahl-e-Haqq of southwestern Iran) are small isolated groups, despised by their neighbors, who try to keep apart and do not threaten their neighbors. (It took an accident of French colonialism to bring the Syrian Alawis into the army and then to power so as to become a danger to their neighbors.) In contrast, the Wahhabism that inspires Osama bin Laden and other contemporary terrorists is not theologically innovative or extreme; it is an especially rigid and simplified version of Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab's original views, which only took common ideas -- legal rather than theological -- about *bid'a*, innovations, and divine unity and otherness to an unusual extreme. On the other hand, some theological innovations, such as the advent of Islamic messianism in this period, had a tremendous effect in releasing the latent energies of Islamic extremism. One group, quiet and constructive now, that really belonged to the extremist Shi'ite *ghulat*, sharing many ideas that bubbled up in this period, became in consequence a conquering threat to the rest of Islam: the Isma'ilis. So theological innovation needs to be watched, something that our intelligence community does not do. It

can be an early warning signal that adventurous transformations are underway, capable of producing strange and unexpected outcomes.

Throughout the development of Shi'ism, we have seen it veer between a military-political track and one of quiet piety. As Heinz Halm writes, "The constant oscillation between a real living Imam and the hope of return of a hidden Mahdi characterizes the whole formative phase of the early Shi'a."⁶⁶ In the next hundred and fifty years, this oscillation was quieted; the Shi'ism ancestral to today's Twelver Shi'ism made a choice by a new doctrine. At this point in the development of Shi'ism, a splintering into many sects was also going on. They were divided by theology, by the Imam they followed, and by their predilection for violence or for quiet piety. Given our interest in moderation and radicalization, it is the latter dichotomy that we are most interested in. On this point as well, a resolution was reached. To understand how it was reached, we can follow the lives of the last six Imams now recognized by the Twelver Shi'ites.⁶⁷

Ja'far al-Sadiq's refusal to accept power

The Sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq was a great grandson of al-Husayn and Imam after Muhammad al-Baqir. He was born in the year 702 and died in 765, momentous years that saw several Shi'ite rebellions (chronicled in the next chapter) and the successful revolution that brought the 'Abbasid dynasty to power. He was married to Fatima al-Hasan, and had two sons: Isma'il ibn Jafar and Abdullah al-Aftah. After his wife's death, one more son, Musa al-Kazim was born to him by a woman named Hamida. Ja'far was 34 years old when his father died and he entered the Imamate. During his lifetime, there was great disappointment among Shi'ites because of the "hidden" Imam al-Hanafiyya's non-appearance, the Abbasid coup and other events. Nevertheless, he lived quietly in Medina and was never willing to be involved in politics. According to many modern scholars, he believed that politics could turn one away from religion.⁶⁸ He turned down the Caliphate which was offered to him by Abu Salama in

⁶⁶ Halm, *Shi'ism*, 18.

⁶⁷ In this section I am grateful for the assistance of Gvantsa Korkia.

⁶⁸ Said Amir Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: A

749, as we will see. There also were many rebel factions asking him for support or offering him to join them, but he declined all of the offers.

Ja'far al-Sadiq was famous for piety and learning; "it is questionable whether Ja'far's father and grandfather were in fact recognized as Imams in their lifetime ... and it is possible that they were only counted as ... Imams later ..." ⁶⁹ It was thus Ja'far's personal stature that produced belief in him and recognition of the Husaynid line as the only true line of Imams. But his theological interests and positions are much more mysterious than those now attributed to him in Twelver Shi'ite tradition. Several prominent extremist theologians were close to him, and he is often considered a channel by which the ideas of *ghulat* that began flourishing after Mukhtar made their way into mainstream Shi'ism. His doctrine of the Imamate is important in its development. It states that an Imam

...transfers the imamate to his successor by an explicit designation or *nass*....The imamate remained located in a specific individual, whether or not he claimed the Caliphate....the principle of the *nass*...made it no longer necessary for an imam to rebel against the established regimes in order to assert his claim or become the actual ruler. In other words, the institutions of the imamate and the caliphate were separated from each other. ⁷⁰

This doctrine is obviously aimed first of all at Zaydi Shi'ite doctrine, that there can be rival claimants to the position of Imam who decide the true Imam by fighting. But it generally separates being Shi'ite from any obligation to rebel against an erroneous ruler—one assumes because he saw Shi'ite ranks thinning with each incessant, fruitless rising. Moreover, as M. G. S. Hodgson noted, it served to group Shi'ites in a single, separate body of people united around their Imams. ⁷¹

Sociohistorical Perspective", Source: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/176150>, accessed on: 06/12/2010 06:29

⁶⁹ Halm, *Shi'ism*, 28.

⁷⁰ Daftary, *Isma'ilis* 2, 81.

⁷¹ M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Vol. 1, 260.

The new doctrine of the Imamate supplies a sufficient reason for Ja'far's refusal of the Caliphate in 749, to be discussed below. Now the stature of the Imam does not depend on political rule; he has a spiritual Caliphate regardless of rulers. The act of refusing the Caliphate in conditions where religious leadership was still identified with seizing power, and where every good seemed to flow from power, must have astounded Ja'far al-Sadiq's contemporaries. Heinz Halm suggests that Ja'far al-Sadiq's action in turning down the Caliphate got Imami Shi'ites accustomed to the idea of their Imams' apoliticality.⁷²

Ja'far's death caused much division in the community, especially because there was not yet an established rule of succession to the Imamate. Ja'far's son Isma'il passed away before his father, and the eldest son, 'Abdallah, died soon after his father's death. Some Shi'ites claimed that Isma'il had not died, but went into hiding. Another group supported the latter's living descendants or his older brother. We should not forget that Ja'far had third son as well, named Musa al-Kazim. Twelver Shi'ites claim that he was only direct designee of Ja'far. This has been a matter of disagreement for these groups ever since, it distinguishes Isma'ilis from Twelvers to this day.

The 7th Imam: Musa al-Kazim (d.799/183)

Musa was Imam Ja'far's youngest son. His famous title is al-Kazim (the reserved one). He took over the holy Imam's office after his father's death. The times of his Imamate were difficult, because he lived under the rule of the 'Abbasid Caliphs. Throughout his life, he witnessed reigns of three Caliphs: al-Mansur, al-Mahdi and Harun ar-Rashid. "The growing community which railed around the Husaynid line appears to have disturbed the Abbasids to such an extent that they brought all potential pretenders to the throne to court, and kept them there under prison-like surveillance."⁷³ Musa was taken to Caliph al-Rashid's residence in Iraq and lived closely watched in Basra, and later in Baghdad. He died in Iraq, in 799. Many scholars believe he was poisoned by Harun al-Rashid.

⁷² Halm, *Shi'ism*, 43.

⁷³ Halm: *Shi'ism*, 31.

Musa al-Kazim's death caused the emergence of the Waqifites, a group that maintained that al-Kazim was not deceased, but would return and fill the world with 'Justice and Equity.' Waqifites believed that he would have two absences, a short one followed by a longer one, extended to his rising. They considered the Imamate suspended with him and believed that he was the Mahdi or *qa'im*.⁷⁴ As Said Amir Arjomand states, this idea could have emerged because of Musa's two periods of imprisonment.⁷⁵ He died in 799 and was buried in Baghdad.

The 8th Imam 'Ali al-Rida (d.818/203)

'Ali al-Rida, son of Imam Musa al-Kazim, was given the title 'the agreeable one.' He was 35 years old when his father, Musa al-Kazim was, according to Shi'ites, martyred at Caliph al-Rashid's residence. He was rejected by the Waqifite Shiites as well. He lived in Medina until 201/816 when Caliph al-Rashid's son, Caliph Ma'mun, made him his heir and took him to his Iranian residence, where he married one of the Caliph's daughters. He spent his life under the Caliph's surveillance and died in 818, while accompanying the Caliph on his march to the west. It is more plausible in this case that he was poisoned by Ma'mun, to whom he was no longer useful.

The 9th Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (d. 835/220)

Muhammad al-Jawad was brought up by his father 'Ali al-Rida. Before his father migrated from Medina, he named Muhammad as his successor. He became Imam at the age of eight and died at the age of twenty-five. He spent most of his life in Ma'mun's residence, married to one of his daughters, under the Caliph's watch and control. Several years later he

⁷⁴ Arjomand, Said Amir: "Imam Absconditus and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shi'ism Circa 280-90 A. H./900 A. D.," (Source: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*), page 2, stable URL : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/605619> ; accessed: 01/12/2010 05:58.

⁷⁵ Arjomand, "Imam Absconditus."

was permitted to return home but Ma'mun's successor, Caliph al-Mu'tasim, forced him to go back to Baghdad where he died in 835.

The 10th Imam Ali al-Hadi (d. 868/254)

Ali al-Hadi, who was also known as Ali al-Naqi, was the tenth of twelve Imams. The Caliph at that time was al-Mutawakkil, who ordered his people to go to Medina and bring Ali al-Hadi to Samarra. He insisted that the Imam live in Samarra under house arrest. Now the Caliph constantly tried to embarrass the Imam in front of theologians and scholars by asking him questions. The Caliph became more and more irritated by Shi'ites preaching about how Imam was more worthy than the Caliphate, so he constantly tried to humiliate him. Imam al-Hadi died in Samarra under house arrest during the Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil's successor.

The 11th Imam al-Hasan al-Askari (d. 873/260)

Imam al-Hasan's title was al-Askari, "military," because he lived in the Caliph's army camp in Samara, a sign of the Caliphs' constantly increasing nervousness about the Imams as possible rivals. There were repressions at that time, because the Shi'ites were growing in both number and power, and the eleventh Imam is believed to have spent most of his life in imprisonment or under Caliph's surveillance. When he died, he left no son behind him, which caused great confusion, because it meant an interruption in the line of Imams which had not happened before. There were many and opposing groups with different theories about the succession. Scholars call this period of Shi'ite history 'the confusion' or 'the perplexity'. Some believed that the Imam was not deceased and would return as the Mahdi, others wanted to give the Imamate to al-Askari's brother Ja'far.

Finally, an idea emerged that the deceased Imam actually left a son after him, and his name was Muhammad, who had been hidden by his father in order to protect him, then concealed on earth by God, living on and on. After his father's death, he was believed by Shiites to be in divinely designed state of absence, called *ghayba* in Arabic, "occultation"

by Western scholars. This idea was gradually adopted by all Imamis, who thus became known as “Twelvers”.⁷⁶ But as time passed, it became necessary to explain this absence, because many were in doubt and confusion, especially about the lifespan of the hidden Imam. Halm mentions that the earliest books defending the doctrine of *ghayba* list mythical long-livers as examples of a longer than average lifespan.⁷⁷ We will soon encounter examples of these doubts.

Said Amir Arjomand interprets the appearance of the idea of *ghayba* in the following way:

A nascent hierarchy of the learned (ulema) of the community had to assure the survival of Imami Shi'ism despite the removal of its main pillar, the Imam. To make sense of this crisis while retaining its control, the Imami leadership had little choice but to borrow the idea of occultation from the chiliastic extremists and asserted its authority on behalf of "the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali," who was said to be in hiding and was eventually identified as the Qa'im (apocalyptic redresser) and the Mahdi (rightly guided, messianic leader).⁷⁸

In Islam, scholars believe, the idea of *gayba* went back to the Kaysaniya, a millenarian Shi'ite group formed after the failure of Mukhtar's uprising in Kufa, whose members had considered Mohammad ibn al-Hanafiya, a son of 'Ali, to be the Mahdi.⁷⁹

The associates of the deceased Imam continued to collect and distribute fixed taxes from followers.⁸⁰ For several years after the eleventh Imam's death, community leaders continued to receive the letters from him. The letters were considered to be the actual Imam's words, which were just written down by the ambassadors. Here is a typical example, an excerpt from one of the letters, “As for Muhammad b. 'Uthman al-'Amri [one of the

⁷⁶ Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Islam in Iran. The Concept of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism”. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Stable URL: <http://www.iranica.com/articles/islam-in-iran-vii-the-concept-of-mahdi-in-twelver-shiism>

⁷⁷ Halm, *Shi'ism*, 34.

⁷⁸ Arjomand, “The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shi'ism”, 4.

⁷⁹ “Ghayba,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/gayba>.

⁸⁰ Arjomand, “Imam Absconditus and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shi'ism Circa 280-90 A. H./900 A. D”, 1.

“Ambassadors”]--God is pleased with him and with his father before him--he is trusted by me and his writing (*kitab*) is my writing.”⁸¹ One can understand why Shi’ites we will encounter considered this whole doctrine a “fraud.”

The fourth safir, al-Samarri, is considered by Shiites as the last person who ever corresponded with Hidden Imam. After that, the ambassadorial service ended, and so did the attempt of establishing Hidden Imam’s representation as an institution. According to a Shi’ite tradition, it was the Imam himself, who cut off all the links with the world, because of increasing tyranny and oppression, retreated into a total occultation, and in one of his letters gave instructions to not designate a successor.⁸² Al-Samarri died in 941, leaving no successor and no formal declaration of Occultation. ‘Ali Amir-Moezzi reports that

The mysterious fate of the presumed son of the eleventh Imam led to several schisms with notable doctrinal variances. Some groups claimed that his son died at a very young age, others that he had lived until a certain age and then died, and still others simply denied his very existence, believing that Hasan Askari never had a son. Only a small minority supported the idea that the son of the eleventh imam was alive, that he was in “occultation,” and that he was to reappear as mahdi (Ar. “the Guided One”) at “the end of time” (*aker al-zaman*). This idea was gradually adopted by all Imamis, who thus became known as twelvers.⁸³

The theological doctrine of the Occultation is thought to have begun in the decade around 900 but the full development of Occultation theology is believed to have happened from 930 to 1055.⁸⁴

The doctrine of the occultation of the Imam is a crucial turn to moderation on the part of Shi’ites. If you do not where the Imam is, he cannot summon you to revolt. The key

⁸¹ Arjomand: “Imam Absconditus,” 4.

⁸² Halm, *Shi’ism*, 37.

⁸³ Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Islam in Iran,” 1.

⁸⁴ Arjomand, “Consolation of theology,” 5.

question, of course, is: what were the reasons behind the adoption of this doctrine? ‘Ali Amir-Moezzi reports that

Imami tradition cites four principal reasons to prove the necessity of the occultation: safeguarding the life of the Hidden Imam; independence with regard to temporal powers which, according to some traditions, will all be unjust until the return of the Mahdi; testing believers in order to measure the degree of their faith; and finally, a secret reason not to be revealed until the end of time.

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The following excerpt from a treatise on occultation by the tenth-century Shi’ite theologian al-Sharif al-Murtada provides crucial evidence:

Thus we say, the reason for the *ghaybah* is fear for him from the oppressive people, and their obstructing his hand from discretionary control over that which has been meant to be his right of discretionary control. [This is] because one attains total benefit from the Imam when he is firmly established and obeyed [by the people] and when there is no obstruction between him and his goals, so as to enable him to lead troops, fight the oppressors, administer legal punishment (*hadd*), protect the boundaries, see that justice is done to the oppressed.⁸⁶

These were the arguments that quieted the Shi’ite revolts of the previous century and a half: the decisive moderation of Shi’ism. But most of the reasons for *ghayba*, occultation, are: he must hide because he can’t rebel successfully. Speed ahead to 1977: Washington, so confident that the Shah was our firm and rich friend, is suddenly disquieted by word of a certain Khomeini, who, unlike every Shi’ite cleric in centuries, seems to want to overthrow a government.⁸⁷ There are here crucial lessons: first, pay attention to doctrine. All the historical case studies teach this lesson. The second lesson is: read the fine print. The boldface text in

⁸⁵ Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Islam in Iran,”6.

⁸⁶ Al-Sharif al-Murtada, “A Risalah on the Ghaybah,” translated by Abdulaziz Sachedina in “A Treatise on the Occultation of the Twelfth Imamite Imam,”13-14.

⁸⁷ Of course, Khomeini repelled suggestions that he might be the Hidden Imam. But he allowed language that *associated him* with the hidden Imam to luxuriate; he allowed himself to be called “Imam,” playing on its ambiguity: prayer leader in a mosque/Messiah. With considerable help from Marxist-Leninist influence in Iran, Khomeini fed on the traditional conception of the *Mahdi* without ever claiming the role.

al-Sharif al-Murtada is: “Stop rebelling, you have no leader.” But the fine print is: *if* the leader comes, blood will flow.

A very important generalization about the moderation or radicalization of universalistic movements is that *superseded doctrine can accompany the new doctrine as a kind of spore* which, when it finds favorable conditions, begins living and growing again.

III: The ‘Abbasid Movement

Genesis of the ‘Abbasid Movement

Our discussion of the ‘Abbasids can be brief, because it was an extremist movement that turned on its radical roots immediately after gaining power. Only one subsequent Caliph made some attempt to return to them. Indeed, the most prevalent Islamic consensus about their early history was that the godless Umayyads were justly overthrown by the pious Sunni ‘Abbasids, who created the last Muslim government that was unified and passed on their centrist legitimacy to the Egyptian Mameluke dynasty. It was a real achievement of Western scholarship, beginning with van Vloten in the 1890s, to show that this whole history is fabricated. The ‘Abbasids, like many extremist currents, emerged from the radical Shi’ite environment after the defeat of Mukhtar’s revolt, and competed with many alternative currents of opposition to the Umayyads that seemed more mainstream and more likely to be successful.⁸⁸ Like the arrival in power of the Bolsheviks in Russia, the ‘Abbasid takeover of the Islamic community was a triumph of underground conspiracy and revolutionary propaganda, helped by the collapse of legitimacy of the ruling Umayyads and by important accidents.

Among the bewildering variety of rival Imams and sects that flourished in the fifty years between the death of Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyya, Mukhtar’s cautious patron, and the triumph of the ‘Abbasids, the line that led to the ‘Abbasids interests us most. The bulk of Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyya’s following was inherited by his son Abu Hashim, who was also believed to have been *chosen* by his father as Imam—the first appearance of the principle of *nass* later used by many Shi’ites to decide the identity of the Imam. Abu Hashim died, allegedly of food poisoning, in 716, while he was visiting the descendants of Muhammad’s uncle al-‘Abbas, called collectively the ‘Abbasids, at their desert residence in Western Arabia. Abu Hashim’s following predictably split into four parts. One of these parts, the largest according to many scholars, asserted that he had transferred his title to the Imamate to one of the ‘Abbasids. It is impossible to know whether there was some truth in

⁸⁸ Bernard Lewis, “‘Abbasiyya,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2 Ed. (afterwards *EI 2*), s.v.

this claim or whether it was fabricated by the ‘Abbasid family; the circumstances are suspicious. On the death of this ‘Abbasid in 743, his son Ibrahim became their leader or Imam. This group of more extreme Shi’ites was known as the Hashimiyya, after Abu Hashim, the son of Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyya. They began to conduct systematic revolutionary propaganda against the Umayyads. Because there was now a powerful government that punished its enemies savagely, the ‘Abbasid propaganda was conducted very secretly. At the moment the Umayyads were in disarray and revolts spouting everywhere, the movement was organized and directed by Abu Salama, from Kufa, the traditional Shi’ite center. Abu Salama was such an important figure in the overthrow of the Umayyads that we should say something about him. While the sources are not good, he seems to have been a Kufan, and a non-Arab client, or *mawla*, of an Arab tribe, and a wealthy manufacturer, recruited by his rich father-in-law, Bukayr ibn Mahan, to the ‘Abbasid revolutionary agitation, which Bukayr had headed.

The ‘Abbasid concentration was fixed not on southern Iraq, the traditional hearth of Shi’ite agitation, but on the province of Khurasan or Khorasan at the northeast of the empire, where local conditions had made both Arabs and non-Arab Muslims highly dissatisfied. Khurasan, a much more important locality in these times, comprised northeastern Iran, Turkmenistan, and northwestern Afghanistan. Many Arabs had been settled there, to fight the infidels, and they had merged with the local Persian-speaking population to an unusual degree. They suffered from the same fiscal burdens as non-Arabs and resented it, and resented as well the Arab tribal group that had recently been favored by the Umayyads. The ‘Abbasids, or rather their central organization in Kufa, sent some Arab missionaries who began to make rapid progress in converting local Arabs and Persians and arousing them against the Umayyads. In order to prevent divisions among the array of groups opposing the Umayyads, all their propaganda called for a *rida min Ahl Muhammad*, a “chosen one from the family of Muhammad.” So the ‘Abbasids cleverly advocated a revolutionary agenda in a moderate manner. Their cause suffered, however, from the problem of lack of a clear, popular leader and the possibility that multiple claimants could step onto the pedestal prepared for them.

Disarray among the Umayyads, 743-749

In 743 this extremist group was working in a very different political and military environment. The Umayyad Caliph who died in this year, Hisham (724-743), had been highly competent, but his agreed successor, al-Walid, was known as a frivolous drunkard, deepening the contempt of the pious for the dynasty. Expansion had ceased, depriving the Umayyads of another source of legitimacy, while Arab tribal conflicts undermining dynastic support had worsened. The arbitrariness of al-Walid II so annoyed other Umayyads that they mounted a military coup, murdering the Caliph in April 744. With the ruling family and its supporting tribes divided, the key conspirator, Yazid III, made himself Caliph, but he died after only six months. His brother Ibrahim became Caliph, but was immediately attacked and deposed by a remote relative -- the Umayyad general Marwan II -- who named himself Caliph (744-750) and transferred the capital to Harran in the far north, near his earlier power base but at the cost of antagonizing many Syrian Arabs. The ephemeral Caliphs from many branches of the Umayyad families had also patronized different tribal groups among the feuding Arabs, dividing Umayyad support at a crucial moment.

Revolts, 740-750, and Zaydi Shi'ism

In the middle of the 8th century A.D., revolts were breaking out everywhere. Already in 739-40, Zayd ibn 'Ali, the grandson of Husayn, had arrived in Kufa and mounted a rebellion. He was the first descendent of Husayn to take the military path, exhibiting a renewed impatience with quietism along the oscillating trajectory of Shi'ite policy. The revolt failed ignominiously and he was killed fighting in the streets. His son Yahya fled to the east, adopting the peripheral strategy, and mounted another revolt at Herat in 743; he was killed in battle and it failed. Zayd's effort, however, was the inspiration for a school of Shi'ism that exists to this day in Yemen: the Zaydis. The tenets of their doctrine will now be described, because they reveal the range of possible responses when extremist movements face difficulties in prevailing. Zaydis are "politically militant and religiously moderate."⁸⁹ The strange theologies that began to enter Shi'ism are alien to them; they do not believe in

⁸⁹ Daftary, *Isma'ilis*, 73.

the supernatural *ghayba* or messianic return of Imams. They believe that there need not be an Imam at every moment, and that there can be more than one in different Zaydi enclaves—both views that remind of the Kharijites. The qualifications for becoming Imam are to be learned in the religious sciences, to claim the Imamate by armed force, and to beat the other claimants in the struggle for it. These views are obviously congenial to peoples, like those of northern Yemen and the mountains south of the Caspian sea, who enjoy fighting and fear a strong, orderly state. In both these areas the Zaydi Shi'ites had great success and established many loosely organized Imamates. In the same way, Kharijite positions were attractive to the people of Oman and North African mountain Berbers. The Zaydi tradition shows the enormous range of Shi'ite alternatives as of the middle of the eighth century, when the 'Abbasid family was also successfully drawing on Shi'ite sentiment.

The Revolt of 'Abd Allah ibn Mu'awiya

The next Shi'ite rebellion was more successful, profiting from the disarray in the Umayyad camp and the other rebellions against them. Some of the deeply split extremist supporters of Abu Hashim after his death had maintained that he had designated his very distant cousin, 'Abd Allah ibn Mu'awiya, as his successor, just as others maintained he had designated the 'Abbasid family. The former group apparently believed in the fulfillment of revelation by successive cycles of Imams who repeat but deepen the teachings of earlier cycles, an innovation that was later adopted by the Isma'ilis. 'Abd Allah ibn Mu'awiya, grandson of 'Ali's brother Ja'far, rebelled in 744, showing again the wide definition of the "People of the House" even at this late point. He was defeated in Iraq, "as the Kufans turned out to be as unreliable as ever."⁹⁰ He then "withdrew to Western Persia, where he soon acquired a large number of supporters,....In 128/745 he established himself at Istakhr in the Fars province, from where he ruled for a few years over a vast territory in Persia...."⁹¹ This mountainous area had earlier been a center of Kharijite insurgency. By the middle of the eighth Christian century, however, there clearly was a general revulsion of feeling from the Umayyads, of which the primary beneficiaries were no longer the Kharijites, discredited by

⁹⁰ Daftary, *Isma'ilis*, 75.

⁹¹ Daftary, *Isma'ilis*, 75.

their extremism and with their military strength depleted (except in North Africa), but groups who could associate themselves with the family of the Prophet, including those ancestral to the Twelver Shi'ites, Zaydi Shi'ites, and the 'Abbasid family. In a way, this was the obvious alternative. The Umayyads had little legitimacy left and were collapsing amid family struggles, and open military rule by the most powerful, the eventual destiny of most Muslims over history, as yet unthinkable.

'Abd Allah ibn Mu'awiya was supported not only by his own extremist followers, but by a motley coalition of other Shi'ite groups including Zaydis, many Kharijites, 'Abbasids, and discontented Umayyad partisans, with many non-Arab fighters. In spite of this support, wide but not deep, the shaky last Umayyad Caliph Marwan II was able to send an army powerful enough to defeat 'Abd Allah ibn Mu'awiya in 748. The variety of the coalition he assembled shows that the vultures were circling around the wounded Umayyads. But who, among the People of the House, could seize the prize?

The 'Abbasid Revolution and Dynasty

It was the 'Abbasids who seized the Caliphate amid the dissolution of the Umayyad Caliphate. The 'Abbasid Revolution, as Bernard Lewis argued, was proto-modern in that it was the product of years of revolutionary propaganda and organization, both secret, crowned by a military campaign.

It came about not as the result of a palace conspiracy or coup d'état, but by the action of an extensive and successful revolutionary propaganda and organization, representing and expressing the dissatisfactions of important elements of the populations with the previous regime, and built up over a long period of time. Like most revolutionary movement it was a coalition of different interests, held together by a common desire to overthrow the existing order, but doomed to break up into conflicting groups once victory was obtained.⁹²

⁹² Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs In History*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 84.

So the ‘Abbasids may have arrived in power as the result of the first revolution in history.

As with Mao Zedong, the revolutionary strategy privileged the periphery of the Islamic empire, thus confirming one of the hypotheses formulated in the course of this research. The ‘Abbasid dynasty appears in history as a Sunni regime. But the original program of the movement was the restoration of the Caliphate to the House of the Prophet, with millenarian overtones, and scholarship in the last 120 years has shown that this program represented the amorphous state of Shi’ism at that time.

Abu Muslim

‘Abd al-Rahman abu Muslim ibn Muslim was one of the most dazzling, successful, and tragic extremists history has ever seen. His origins and early history are mysterious, though he seems to have been a Persian born in Merv—in Khurasan—or in Isfahan, who grew up in restless Kufa. When he breaks into the course of history he was a freed slave among Arabs proud of their noble lineage. He “received his familiar name from the ‘Abbasid imam when he joined the ‘Abbasid cause....”⁹³ M. A. Shaban had an insight into the meaning of this name that lights up the whole ‘Abbasid movement. A traditional Arab name most often consists of a given name, here ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Slave of the Compassionate,” that is, of God, a name derived from a son, the *nasab*, prefixed “abu,” and a *kunya*, a name derived from your father, prefixed by “ibn.”⁹⁴ Shaban points out that ‘Abd al-Rahman was a name often given to converts by their Muslim patrons. As for the rest,

His kunya, Abu Muslim, means the father of a muslim....In other words the name represents a muslim who is a son of a muslim and the father of a muslim.⁹⁵

⁹³ G. H. Yusofi, “Abu Moslem Korasani,” *E. Iranica*, s.v., accessed December 14, 2010.

⁹⁴ Kennedy, *Prophet*, xiii-xiv.

⁹⁵ M. A. Shaban, *The ‘Abbasid Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 154.

The chief missionary's name is itself the slogan of the movement, which, much more clearly than any previous Islamic movement, had a social program: the equality of all Muslims as Muslims. The Muslim community should be the possession of all the Muslims, not just of Arabs. This seems to be the understanding embodied in the Qu'ran, in the second Surah. The Umayyads had created an empire in which Arabs were set above other Muslims, and some Arabs were set above others. In this time, however, there were more and more converts, and they were dissatisfied to be excluded from the privileges of the Arabs, particularly the subsidies that Arabs received from the treasury. So Abu Muslim's name and the program it represented had a potent appeal. The Kharijites had stumbled upon it, and then it had been clearly embraced by Mukhtar. Now it was to dissolve an empire. Julius Wellhausen recognized over a hundred years ago:

All this would seem to show that there exists a close connection between the unsuccessful revolution of Mukhtar and the successful one of Abu Muslim.

Notwithstanding that the fire in the year 67 [of the Hijra] seemed to be extinguished by blood, it still glowed on under its ashes and spread from Kufa to Khurasan.⁹⁶

Sometime in 745 Abu Muslim was sent from Kufa to Khurasan to head the movement there—when he was in his twenties, it appears. Although he was so young, a freed slave, and a stranger, he established an ascendancy over the discontented Khurasanis very quickly. He must have been a powerful speaker and an effective organizer. Soon he was able to raise the black flag of revolt in 746. The color black, in which his army also dressed, was a color associated not only with the martyred Imams and with revenge, but with messianic fears and hopes. As with the red flag in 1917, his choice had emotional impact: as far away as the Byzantine Empire and Visigothic Spain chroniclers record the 'Abbasid conquerors as wearers of black.⁹⁷ As Abu Muslim raised this army he acted on the program of the movement:

⁹⁶ Julius Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*, tr. Margaret Graham Weir, (Beirut: Khayats, 1963), 505. Originally published 1902.

⁹⁷ Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 533.

Abū Moslem...emphasized the common bond of Khorasanian Muslim identity among all who supported the ‘Abbasid cause, whether partly assimilated Arabs or Persian *mavālī*. When he began assembling his forces, he registered on his *dīvān* [payroll] all participants in the *da’va* [*da’wa*] by locality and not by tribe.⁹⁸

The choice of the revolutionaries to emphasize the equality of Muslims under God was something extreme: it chose principle over concrete distinctions and the given realities. In retrospect it was, on the whole, a correct choice. Empires where one people rules over others without the distinction being overcome have often been short-lived—the fate of the British and French colonial empires and of the Soviet Union, after Stalin turned to Russian nationalism. Even where the ruling ethnicity has managed to remain in the saddle, as in Latin America, it has produced poisonous hatreds between ethnic groups and instability. But the choice of equality came at a cost. It reinforced the original sense that the Islamic community should be under one government; but an empire so vast could only be a tyranny, and the ‘Abbasids and every subsequent ruling group failed in holding it together. The unity of the Caliphate was to perish within a few years, when an Umayyad refugee fled to Spain and set up an independent government there. Ever since, states of practicable size in the Muslim, and particularly in the Arab, world have suffered from impaired legitimacy—a reality attested by the many ephemeral unions of Arab countries in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties, as well as the current strivings of Islamists to recreate a universal Caliphate. Those strivings are in a real sense the legacy of the ‘Abbasid Imam Ibrahim and his followers Abu Salama and Abu Muslim. Their choice led away from giving any legitimacy to diversity and particularity, as the Kharijite and Zaydi Shi’i permissibility of multiple Imams did.

In 748 the revolutionary armies seized Khurasan, and the next year they defeated the Umayyad governor of Iraq and entered Kufa, the hearth of all Shi’ite movements. There must have been much joy. Abu Salama proclaimed himself *vazir*, or grand vizier, of the Chosen One without saying who that man was. In itself this was a startling event: a non-Arab proclaims himself the deputy of the absent Caliph. The first thing that all the discontented Arabs and Mawali wanted to know was, who was their new Imam, the chosen one from the

⁹⁸ C. E. Bosworth, “‘Abbasid Caliphate,” *E. Iranica*, s.v., accessed May 3, 2009.

family of the prophet? There were still many possibilities, because Shi'ite legitimism was not yet as formalized as it later became. Ibrahim, the 'Abbasid Imam who led the revolutionary conspiracy, had been imprisoned and now killed by the Umayyads once they understood the conspiracy against them. Hugh Kennedy explains the range of possibilities well.

The second problem was the choice of leader within this extended Family. There were three possible criteria. The first, the one which was later adopted by the Shi'a, was that of hereditary succession in the line of al-Husayn; but this idea was not universally accepted in Umayyad times. The second idea was the concept of *naṣṣ*, that is designation by the previous *imām*. The person thus chosen would have to be a member of the Family but not necessarily the eldest son of the previous *imām*. The third was the Zeydī [Zaydi] view that imamate properly belonged to any member of the Family who was prepared to take up arms.⁹⁹

Abu Salama, who was in charge on the scene, reacted in a puzzling way. For two months he negotiated, offering the Caliphate to Ja'far al-Sadiq, the most respected candidate for Imam of all the descendants of Husayn, and to other descendants of 'Ali. Apparently they all refused, though some might have refused the terms, unknown to us, on which Abu Salama offered Caliphal rule. Earlier, Ja'far al-Sadiq had refused to support some Shi'ite rebellions. We do not know why Abu Salama, who had been chosen by the 'Abbasid family, turned against them at this point. Kufa was a murky whirlpool of intrigue and rumor as the war with Marwan, the Umayyad Caliph, went on, yet there was no one designated as the counter-Caliph. In any case, the victory of the extremist movement against the Umayyads had led, as so often, to major splits within it. As Claude Cahen wrote, the various groups within the victorious side wanted

...to take vengeance on those who had usurped the place of the Family [of the Prophet] and were responsible for the deaths of so many of its members: one cannot

⁹⁹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2 Ed., (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 1986), 124.

insist enough on the fact of this vengeance, in Arab tradition, the sole rallying cry common to all the participants of the movement....¹⁰⁰

Finally the Abu Muslim and the Khurasanis grew impatient with the prolonged suspense and got in touch with their original patrons, the ‘Abbasid family, which had come to Kufa but was in hiding. The Khurasanis selected Abu’l- ‘Abbas, a brother of Ibrahim, and led him to the Friday mosque where, in October 749, he received the *ba’ya* or oath of loyalty of the assembled Kufans as the Caliph al-Saffah. Al- Saffah chose a “regnal name,” that is, an official name that expressed his claim to occupy the throne. Such regnal names were used by the ‘Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphs, for the first time in Islamic history, and show their new obsession with religious legitimacy. To understand it, we should imagine that Henry VIII’s official name were not “Henry” but “Defender of the Faith,” the title given him by an unsuspecting Pope. These regnal names provide, as Bernard Lewis brilliantly noticed, an important clue to the early identity chosen by the ‘Abbasids.¹⁰¹ Abu’l Abbas chose a title implying his millenarian role, al-Saffah, “one who pours out,” either blood or money, both being the subject of myths then circulating about the character of the Mahdi once he appears. Al-Mansur, “the victor,” the regnal name of the second Caliph, is another word with messianic associations. The third Caliph actually called himself al-Mahdi, while the fourth rearranged the vowels, less essential in Semitic languages, to al-Hadi, with the same meaning, (rightly) guided; both words had come to be messianic appellations. These names are the clearest sign that the new regime claimed messianic, extremist legitimacy.

Abu Salama acquiesced in the Caliphal choice. Still the seat of the new dynasty was very precarious and the relations among its leaders uneasy. Finally the Umayyad Caliph himself was defeated by the ‘Abbasids in 750, in the Battle of the Greater Zab in Kurdistan, and the ‘Abbasids consolidated their authority throughout the empire, except for Spain. Al-Saffah moved the capital to Iraq, to a succession of capitals near Kufa called al-Hashimiyya, again expressing the claim to legitimacy linking the ‘Abbasids with the descendents of ‘Ali. Iraq was also the source of far more revenue than any other province, and closer to Khurasan

¹⁰⁰ Claude Cahen, *L’Islam: des origines au debut de l’empire Ottoman*, (Paris: Hachette/Pluriel, 1997), 74.

¹⁰¹ Bernard Lewis, *Zakir Husain Presentation Volume*, (New Delhi, 1968), 13-22.

which had put the ‘Abbasids in power. The Khurasaniyya or Abna, the troops from Khurasan, became the core of the ‘Abbasid army.

Meanwhile, Al-Saffah was understandably suspicious of Abu Salama, but he did not immediately move against him. Worrying that Abu Muslim would stand with the vizier, al-Saffah dispatched his brother Abū Ja’far Mansur to Khurasan to get Abu Muslim’s cooperation in disposing of his vizier. Abu Muslim agreed, and volunteered to send Marar ibn Anas to murder Abu Salama. This was naïve, because tension between the ‘Abbasids and Abu Muslim was growing, Abu Muslim and Abu Ja’far Mansur went on pilgrimage together, and Abu Ja’far Mansur, on his return, allegedly advised his brother that his Caliphate would never be safe as long as Abu Muslim lived.

Soon thereafter al-Saffah died, in June 754, and Abu Ja’far Mansur became Caliph, with the messianic regnal name al-Mansur. In spite of Abu Muslim’s help in defeating Al-Saffah’s uncle, who claimed the Caliphate, disagreements grew, culminating in Abu Muslim’s disobedience and orders to return to the capital. Abu Muslim at first intended to disobey, but was apparently won over by followers who had been suborned by the Caliph. Abu Muslim left Khurasan and went to the capital. When Abu Muslim entered the palace and surrendered his sword, the Caliph began to enumerate his misdeeds. As Abu Muslim reminded him to whom he owed his throne, al-Mansur clapped his hands: picked killers came forth and murdered Abu Muslim (13 February 755). Having embraced the radical millenarian symbolism of revolution, the color black and the regnal names, the ‘Abbasid Caliphs were now eliminating the radicals.

The element in the radical program best preserved under al-Mansur was the equality of all Muslims. The slightly later historian al-Mas’udi recorded that

Mansūr ...was the first caliph who utilized his freedmen and famuli (*mawālīyaho wa-gelmānaho*) for official posts, appointing them to important offices and preferring them over the Arabs. Other, later caliphs of his line followed the example; hence the

Arabs lost the chief commands, their preeminence disappeared, and their previous dignities vanished.¹⁰²

Killing the millenarian leader who had brought him to power, the ‘Abbasid Caliphs al-Saffah and his brother, al-Mansur, quickly deradicalized the regime in many respects. As soon as al-Saffah mounted the pulpit in the Friday mosque to give his first sermon, zealous Shi’ites must have noticed that he did not curse the false Caliphs or have the call to prayer given with its Shi’ite variations. Still, the times were chaotic and the government unsettled; there was room for hope. The descendants of ‘Ali were treated better, given more honor and better pensions. But as time went on it became clearer that the ‘Abbasids were joining the Sunnis—an amazing reversal of their revolutionary propaganda. The next, long-lived Caliphs, al-Mansur (754-775) and al-Mahdi (775-785) went further. The Shi’ite scholar Farhad Daftary reports the deradicalization as follows.¹⁰³

The caliph al-Mansur adopted still more repressive measures against the ‘Alids and the Shi’is. In 141/758, he massacred a group of the Rawandiyya who besieged his palace and hailed him as the incarnation of divinity. A few years later, he had many of the ‘Alids, notably from the Hasanid branch, imprisoned or killed.

Perhaps we should see al-Mansur’s most famous act, the construction of great city of Baghdad on the Tigris River in 762, to serve as the new Abbasid capital, in a similar light. Almost the first change the Abbasids had made was to move the empire's capital from Damascus, in Syria, to Iraq. Moving the capital was part of the mawalis’ (Muslim non-Arabs’) preference for less Arab domination over the empire. The Shi’ites might reasonably hope that their own city of Kufa, where ‘Ali had his capital and was martyred, or al-Saffah’s capitals near it, would become the new center of the Islamic world. Instead a new city was constructed near the ruins of Ctesiphon, the pagan Sasanid capital.

Al-Mahdi, al-Mansur’s successor, reversed some of these policies; perhaps he wished to stem the extremist revolts that had marred the reign of his predecessor. The new Caliph

¹⁰² Quoted in Bosworth, “‘Abbasid Caliphate” *EIr*, s. v.

¹⁰³ Daftary, *Isma’ilis* 2, 79.

tried to please the descendants of 'Ali by gifts, estates, and court offices. He tried to show his piety, building mosques, including the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and recruiting a special bodyguard from the Ansar still living in Medina. But these were cosmetic concessions that, according to Daftary, cloaked a deepening of al-Mansur's anti-Shi'ite policies:

The 'Abbasids' breach with their Shi'i origins and their efforts to legitimize their own rights to the caliphate were finally completed by the caliph Muhammad al-Mahdi (158-169/775-785), who abandoned the 'Abbasid claim to Abu Hashim's inheritance and instead declared that the Prophet had actually appointed his uncle al-'Abbas as his successor. This, of course, implied the repudiation of the analogous claims of the 'Alids. With these adverse developments, those of the extremist Shi'i followers of the 'Abbasids who did not scatter became alienated from them.¹⁰⁴

Under al Hadi, the Caliph who ruled briefly after al-Mahdi, the sky over the Shi'ites became still blacker. Kennedy reports:

...The 'Alids....were deprived of many of their allowances and ceased to enjoy the privileged status at court they had had during his father's (al-Mahdī's) reign. In response to this, one 'Alid leader, al-Husayn b.'Ali, organized a rebellion in Medina in Dhu'l-Qa'da 169/ May 786.¹⁰⁵

The arrival in power of an extremist movement was marked by a sudden and progressive de-radicalization. Never in history, perhaps, has this happened so swiftly and completely. It is what some American policymakers hoped for with the Iranian Revolution, then with Taliban, and finally with Hamas. We will see something similar, but not as abrupt or complete, happen with the Fatimid Isma'ilis. This event can be compared to Cromwell's turn against the radicals in the New Model Army, which it dwarfs. One could also compare it with Lenin's alliance with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and his acceptance of peasant seizure of land (rather than its nationalization), in order to win the peasantry, or perhaps to

¹⁰⁴ Daftary, *Isma'ilis* 2, 79.

¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, *Prophet*, 139.

the beginning of the quasi-free market New Economic Policy after the Civil War. But essentially the acquisition of power radicalized Lenin who during the Civil War broke with the Socialist Revolutionaries and the peasantry, instituting the savage confiscatory policy of War Communism. Contrary to what I thought earlier in the study, it is *modern secular* universalistic movements that tend to be radicalized by the acquisition of power.

The 'Abbasids succeeded in conquering or being accepted by the whole Muslim world, from the Atlantic Ocean to India, except Spain, and long ruled it as a new dynasty from their new capital in Baghdad. The success of the 'Abbasid revolutionary movement when so many others had failed was a success of extremism. It was partly due the crisis of the Umayyads, partly to accident, partly to pioneering the peripheral formula in order to recruit a powerful army, and partly to the wide attraction of Shi'ite claims and their lack of precision as to which relative of Muhammad had the legitimate title to rule.

The First 'Abbasid Civil War

The next Caliph, the same Harun al-Rashid well known from the *Thousand and One Nights*, had two sons, who became the Caliphs al-Ma'mun and al-Amin. In 802 Harun al-Rashid ordered that al-Amin be his successor, with al-Ma'mun serving as governor of highly autonomous Khurasan and then as caliph after the death of al-Amin. Al-Ma'mun seems to have been the older of the two brothers, but his mother was a Persian woman, while al-Amin's mother was a princess of the reigning 'Abbasid family. After al-Rashid's death in 809, the two brothers began to be at enmity. In response to al-Ma'mun's moves toward greater independence, such as taking the title Imam, al-Amin named his own son Musa as his heir. Relations broke down entirely and led to civil war in which al-Ma'mun's newly recruited Khurasani troops, led by the Persian Tahir bin Husain, defeated al-Amin's armies and laid siege to Baghdad. In 813, al-Amin was beheaded and al-Ma'mun recognized as caliph throughout the empire. The Khorasanian guards proved to be decisive for the second time. Al-Amin's army was the largest and best-equipped in living memory, numbering perhaps as many as 50,000. The other army, commanded by Tahir for al-Ma'mun, contained about 10,000 at the most, however, it contained a high proportion of cavalymen, whereas al-

Amin's force relied mostly on infantry. This battle also marked a military turning point. According to Hugh Kennedy,

The Battle of Rayy marked the turning point in the military tactics of the Period. The large infantry army was defeated by a smaller cavalry force. This may have marked the end of the large armies of foot soldiers which were typical of the much earlier Islamic warfare and the superiority of the smaller groups of mounted men, either armored spearmen or mounted archers.¹⁰⁶

The end result was that Al-Ma'mun became the sole Caliph. Yet, he did not arrive in Baghdad until 819, not only because of the destruction and continued disorder in the city, but because he decided to rule from Merv, now a desiccated oasis in Turkmenistan, then a great urban center. This was a meaningful choice, because it was considered the capital of Khurasan and had been Abu Muslim's center. Al-Ma'mun (813-833) was an ideologically experimental Caliph in a way that reminds somewhat of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim, Stalin or Gorbachev. Perhaps he felt that the 'Abbasid dynasty was, after sixty-three years, losing its ideological legitimacy. His maneuvers may have been encouraged by the fact that the 'Alid Shi'is were in disarray, split over the succession to the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq; they, as well as the 'Abbasids, were in search of a new ideological synthesis. In addition to establishing his capital in Merv, far to the east, al-Ma'mun adopted the religious, and increasingly Shi'ite, title Imam, changed the color of the dynasty from the eschatological black to green, associated with the 'Alids, and in 817 adopted the Shi'ite Imam 'Ali al-Rida (Imam, by the present Twelver count, from 799 to 818) as his heir. 'Ali al-Rida was older than he was, and it is debatable whether he was expected to come to the throne. Al-Ma'mun (813-833) was an ideologically experimental Caliph in a way that reminds somewhat of Stalin or Gorbachev. What al-Ma'mun intended to accomplish by this is unclear, but he certainly wanted to re-associate the 'Abbasid and Shi'ite causes, which had split apart in the two-thirds of a century since the revolution. This move produced rebellion in Baghdad, and

¹⁰⁶ Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 109.

‘Ali al-Rida died, very possibly poisoned, soon after, in the course of al-Ma’mun’s grudging move to Baghdad.

The recourse to Shi’ite legitimacy having failed to produce the hoped results, al-Ma’mun turned to the Mu’tazilite school of theology, which made use of the newly known Aristotelian logic to rework Islamic theology in a way that would make Islam intellectually respectable to those who knew Greek philosophy. The key dogma, the created status of the Qur’an, worked to make the decisions of the Caliph as authoritative as the holy scripture. By taking this position, al-Ma’mun was recovering the religious authority possessed by the “orthodox” and Umayyad Caliphs, which was gradually being lost to Islamic scholars in al-Ma’mun’s time.¹⁰⁷ This was still the Shi’ite position in al-Ma’mun’s time, and shows that he was trying to shake up religious loyalties and use elements of various traditions. Contrary to the recent Islamic trend, in which regimes of a particular sectarian allegiance almost never tried to enforce it on society, al-Ma’mun instituted a sort of inquisition, the *mihna*, or “ordeal,” which pried into the orthodoxy of prominent people. Had this orientation continued, it would have created a regime more like the Soviet one, in which ideology was central to its definition but was altered by each ruler according to his own agenda.

Turning to the Pagans for Help

Another activity of Ma’mun’s showed that the connection with Greek philosophy was not an accidental one. He set up a sort of translation bureau, the Bayt al-Hikma or “House of Wisdom,” to translate Greek philosophic works, via Syriac, into Arabic. It had immense influence, creating in Baghdad a great intellectual center marked by thinkers like Abu Nasr al-Farabi. Like Shi’ism, which was beginning to come under philosophic influence in this period, Ma’mun somehow saw philosophy as an alternative source of legitimacy.

The Problem of Extremist Legitimacy

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

This case can introduce the *problem of legitimacy*. Modern political science tends to give short shrift to issues of political legitimacy, but the exposure of the Soviet regime's crimes by *glasnost*, followed by its repudiation by the people it claimed to represent in some striking races in the 1989 and 1990 elections, fatally weakened the powerful Soviet system. As Nathan Leites argues, there was earlier anxiety about its legitimacy. The cases of the 'Abbasids and the Isma'ili Fatimids likewise show how important it was. Beginning with millenarian and quasi-Shi'ite associations that were falsified by events, or suffered in comparison with the claims of 'Ali's own descendents, the 'Abbasids were forced to put on various ideological garments, ending in an unqualified reversion to the Sunni mainstream that they were originally protesting against. Questions of legitimacy need much more attention from intelligence analysts. Was it not the deepest problem faced by the Shah of Iran in the nineteen-seventies that his regime was neither democratic, nor Marxist, nor Islamic?

The experiments in raising legitimacy were not able to stem the decentralization of the Caliphate, which gained speed in the reign of al-Ma'mun. After al-Ma'mun returned to Baghdad and a Persian from Herat, his victorious general Tahir ibn Husayn, was appointed governor of Khurasan, followed in turn by his descendants, the eastern provinces became more and more independent of the center. At the same time, the Kharijites and Shi'ites, who had been pushed out of the central Middle East by the Sunni policy of the 'Abbasids, moved toward the periphery of the Caliphate and established bases from which they were able to threaten the center. From the Zaydi Shi'i fastness of the Alborz mountains, south of the Caspian sea, came the Buyid family who brought Iraq and Persia under their control in the next century.

The final abandonment of the ideological experiments of the 'Abbasids came with the accession of the Caliph al-Mutawwakil, in 851, who, almost exactly a hundred years after the Revolution abolished al-Ma'mun's Mu'tazilite official ideology, required the cursing of 'Ali from the pulpits, and desecrated the tombs of the Shi'ite Imams. This was truly a betrayal of the revolution. But from the standpoint of our interests, it marks the final moderation of the 'Abbasids. It coincides with an accelerating decline; the moderate Caliph was murdered by his own Turkish slave soldiers, an innovation of this period, and four different Caliphs were

proclaimed by them over the course of nine years (861-870), three of whom were murdered.
Moderation and success do not go together for every regime.

IV. Isma'ili Movements and States

Why in the world should policymakers concern themselves with the Isma'ilis? Today they are a tiny minority, a small fraction of one percent of all Muslims, and commendably moderate. The answer, in a sentence, is that they once had the most extreme doctrine ever held by a large or powerful group in any of the monotheistic religions. The religions founded by the heirs of Abraham have tended to return again and again to a group of core beliefs held at their origins. Some theologies held by Isma'ilis at some points in their long history, however, look like Greek philosophy rebranded with a Muslim label. And in its behavior at certain points, Isma'ilism looks like the most radical movement that has ever held political power for long and endangered other states. At several points, Isma'ili rulers or rebels announced that the Islamic law was abrogated and that the messianic age was beginning on earth. In at least two cases they defiled the Koran and mosques, insulted Muhammad and 'Ali, the founder of Shi'ism. Once the most radical Isma'ilis stole the sacred Black Stone from the Ka'aba in Mecca, and took it away to their capital—implying that they were founding a new religion with a new center. Turning to political tactics, these included at some points secret propaganda and organization-building, the conversion of barbarians, armed revolts, and the systematic penetration of non-Isma'ili states by spies who would then cripple these states by assassination. So Isma'ilism tests the *limits of extremism*.

Isma'ilism: the basics

Like all Shi'ites, Isma'ilis believe that the ordinary pious man, busy and not learned, needs an authority who can replace the absent prophet: the Imam. That Imam should be from the family of the prophet, who inherit special wisdom from Muhammad. This means that they can understand not only the exoteric or surface aspects of religion—the *zahir*—but the deeper inner teaching. Almost all thinkers before the end of the eighteenth century accepted this basic distinction, but the Isma'ilis made it a central aspect of their faith; they often were called *batinis* or followers of a secret teaching. They did not call themselves Isma'ilis, but *Ahl-al-Haqq*, People of the Truth, the hidden truth. Isma'ilism arose at the time when the

huge impact of Greek thought on Muslim views was taking place, and Isma'ilis were particularly open to it.

Who is the Imam? Like the developing Twelver Shi'ites, the Isma'ilis believed the Imam must be a descendent of 'Ali and of Fatima, thus of Muhammad himself, through Imam Husayn and Ja'far al-Sadiq. A new Imam is selected by his predecessor (by *nass*, designation). Isma'ilis differ from the proto-Twelvers, however, in which son of Ja'far al-Sadiq was chosen to follow him. The proto-Twelvers believed that Musa al-Kazim became Imam after Ja'far, while the early Isma'ilis gave this status to Isma'il and then to his sons 'Abdallah al-Aftah or, more often, Muhammad ibn Isma'il. Past this point there were two points of view, which sometimes alternated over time within a dynasty. The first was that Muhammad ibn Isma'il would return as the messiah or mahdi—the same as the later Twelver belief, which the Isma'ilis and earlier, now vanished Shi'ite groups held before them, but applied to a different Imam-Mahdi. Another version was that Muhammad had descendents who were secretly leading the community up to the moment when historical Isma'ili leaders began conducting secret propaganda in the middle of the ninth century, and then emerged as an open revolutionary movement at the end of the ninth century.

When they began spreading its propaganda and making converts, the Isma'ilis already had distinctive beliefs, a vast system of cosmology and history partly Muslim in origin, partly Greek and Gnostic. This was replaced by an even more complex cosmology and history in the tenth and eleventh century, and we do not need to know it in detail. Its complexity is, however, important, for only intellectuals can really master it. For now, the important thing to know is that the six prophets from Adam to Muhammad announced six religions all of which were useful to man but exoteric. This theory of history thus wraps up all religions into Isma'ilism; it has the charm of Marxism in that it explains everything, if you believe the premises. The successive revelations cloak the secret religion, "the religion of Adam" which is the same throughout. Each prophet is accompanied by an executor (*wasi*) or silent one (*samit*), whose task it is to expound to the elect the secret religion. In each cycle, each pair of prophets and executors is followed by seven Imams. At the end of the cycle, the seventh Imam comes forward as the next prophet. We are now in the last sub-cycle of the last cycle,

so the fervent hope and urgency of the end time is built into the system. In the original Isma'ili view, the Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il will come forward as the very last prophet, who will abrogate external Islam, including the Islamic law, and usher in a perfect age on earth. So the hope for release from the limits set by the Islamic law is an important charm of Isma'ilism. But we are not to believe man as he now is will simply do what he wants; his desires will all be innocent and loving, like Adam and Eve before the Fall, and therefore he will not need the law.¹⁰⁸

The First Isma'ilis

These doctrines were first taught in Khuzistan, now the “oil patch” of southwestern Iran, by a certain the ‘Abd Allah the Big or the Elder. The origin of this family is very obscure; later they claimed to be descendants of Ja'far al-Sadiq through his grandchildren ‘Abd Allah al-Aftah or, more often, Muhammad ibn Isma'il. Thus they were also descendants of the Caliph ‘Ali and of Muhammad, through his daughter Fatima. But, as the greatest contemporary expert on Isma'ilism puts it, “Doubts concerning the ‘Alid extraction of the Isma'ilis need to be taken seriously.”¹⁰⁹ For our purposes these doubts are important only because descent from ‘Ali and Muhammad was the source of authority for Shi'ites. Like Stalin after he was denounced by Lenin, the legitimacy of the Isma'ili leaders was always in question. In any case, ‘Abd Allah's teaching outraged his neighbors, so he was forced to flee—like Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism—from place to place, ending in Salamiya, a Syrian town on the edge of the desert. From Salamiya he sent out missionaries all over the Islamic world to spread his teaching. In the conditions where the ‘Abbasid dynasty was turning into an unstable tyranny dominated by half-barbarian Turkish slave soldiers, its heartland consumed by a Mahdist revolt of black slaves (869-883), and Shi'ism was without an Imam on earth and split among bickering factions, the new message spread with amazing

¹⁰⁸ For this system see Wilferd Madelung, “Isma'iliyya,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second edition, afterwards *EI2*, s.v., Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2 Ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 128-136, and Heinz Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi: the Rise of the Fatimids*, translated by Michael Bonner, (Leiden: E. I. Brill, 1996), 16-18. Halm's wonderful book is the best source for the early Fatimid movement, and has the excitement of a novel in spite of its scholarly precision; it is my principal source for the Khuzistani, Syrian and Maghrib phases of Isma'ilism.

¹⁰⁹ Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, translated by Janet Watson and Marion Hill, 2 Ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 162.

rapidity. By the end of the ninth century we know of secret revolutionary cells in Iraq, Syria, many parts of Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Algeria, and these are only the most successful. What made it so successful?

This question can be answered from the amazingly vivid testimonies of Isma'ili missionaries about their conversion, which explain as well how the movement attracted the young while maintaining secrecy. Here is the account of the man who planted, 1100 years ago, the still existing Isma'ili group in Yemen, Ibn Hawshab, known to Isma'ilis as Mansur al-Yaman, "the victor of Yemen," interspersed with Heinz Halm's comments:¹¹⁰

I thought about the fraud which the followers of Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-'Askari (the twelfth Imam) were perpetrating, namely that he was supposed to be alive, and that he would emerge in the end, without ever tasting death. But time dragged on, the wait grew long, and the pondering and the brooding grew ever stronger.

As he was reciting the Quran on the bank of the Euphrates, Ibn Hawshab was observed by two men.

When I came to the river, the hour of prayer was approaching. I completed the ritual ablutions and prayed; then I sat down, and thought about my situation. I started to recite the Quran, and began the sura of *The Cave* (Sura 18). As I recited it, a magnificent old man approached, accompanied by another man... Then a youth approached with springing gait, coming towards me; I wanted to prevent him from doing this, out of reverence for the old man, but he took no heed. I therefore asked him, 'Who are you, my son?' He answered: 'A descendent of al-Husayn.'

This mention of the Prophet's grandson al-Husayn, who was killed at Karbala', elicits for Ibn Hawshab a formula which is used customarily in such cases, and through which he involuntarily reveals himself as a Shi'ite:

¹¹⁰ Halm, *Empire*, 32-34, from *Sirat ibn Hawshab*, quoted in the Yemeni chronicler of Shi'ism Idris 'Imad al-Din and the *Iftitah* of the important judge Qadi al-Nu'man.

Then my eyes filled with tears, and I called out: ‘you are dearer to me than my father, you son of the Resplendent One [Fatima], who was stained with blood, who was prevented from drinking water!’

The name of al-Husayn, thrown out as bait, has caught the prey; Shi’ite sentiment and Shi’ite eloquence have betrayed the Shi’ite.

Then I noticed that the old man was looking at me, and was saying something which I could not understand to the man sitting across from him. Then the man called to me, ‘Come here to us, may God have mercy on you!’ I arose, went over, and sat down at the old man’s feet, and I saw that tears were flowing through his beard-- I think because I had recalled al-Husayn. He said to me, ‘Who you are, that you recall al-Husayn in this way?’ I said, ‘A Shi’ite.’ ‘What is your name?’ ‘Al-Hasan b. Farah b. Hawshab.’ ‘I know your father as a Twelver Shi’ite.’ ‘So he is.’ ‘So do you too follow this faith?’ I fell silent, but he said, ‘Just speak, for we are your brethren.’ I replied, ‘I was one of those who profess that faith, until the matter vanished through our hands; it was the anxiety of my heart that drove me here to this place.’ And I told him what had befallen me.

What does Ibn Hawshab mean by “the matter vanished through our hands?” Clearly, he means that, as a Shi’ite, he needed a religious authority, an Imam, but he had vanished. (“The matter” is a common way of speaking of an important religious necessity in the Arabic of that time.) As a Shi’ite attuned to the rumors and debates among Shi’ites, Ibn Hawshab has heard what “the followers of Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-‘Askari (the twelfth Imam) were perpetrating,” as he says at the beginning of this account, but he regards it as a “fraud,” Hence his “anxiety.”

As this text and others prove, the trigger for the origin of the Isma’ili movement was the knowledge that the eleventh Imam had no son, and the announcement by some eminent Shi’i clerics of the proto-Twelver current that the Imam, the legitimate head of the Muslim community, had been hidden from sight by God: the contemporary Twelver (Iranian and

Lebanese) Shi'ite doctrine of the "occultation" of the Imam.¹¹¹ This happened when the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari, died in 874, without a son.¹¹² The purpose of this doctrine, we have argued, was to end the splitting caused by succession struggles, and to remove the leader who again and again was expected by his followers to rise up and overthrow the godless Sunni Caliphs—and who therefore was a magnet for the Caliphs' persecution of the Shi'ite community. In other words, *an innovation in doctrine motivated by a profoundly moderate purpose sparked a more extreme movement than the one it was intended to moderate.*

Thus the people first attracted to the new Isma'ili message were those who could not accept the moderation of proto-Twelve Shi'ism. If the Shi'ites were people who made extreme demands on the Islamic community, demands for justice, authenticity and loyalty to the Prophet's family, then the first converts to Isma'ilism were the most extreme of the extreme. Just how they were drawn into the Isma'ili teaching Ibn Hawshab explains in recounting the end of his conversation with the old man. The old man had asked him to interpret the passage from the Qu'ran he had been reciting when they met. The young Ibn Hawshab replies:

'What should I say? By God, it is as if I had not recited it at all; I am too insignificant to know what it means. But if you wish to teach it to me, then do so.'

'There is a fine veil spread over it,' he said. 'Will you lift it for me?' 'This will happen, God willing, as soon as possible.' The man began to speak about something else, and each time he was about to arrive at the [appropriate] answer, he would start again with something else. I, meanwhile, asked him each time for the answer, but he would only repeat what he had already said. Finally, he got ready to stand up, and I said, 'Sir, I would be glad to know where you live.' 'What for?' 'So that your promise may be fulfilled!' At that he smiled, and said, 'Perhaps we shall meet again here tomorrow, God willing.'

¹¹¹ See also the evidence of the recruitment of the propagandist to Yemen 'Ali ibn al-Fadl, in Halm, *Empire*, 36. Halm's wonderful book is the best source for the early Fatimid movement, and has the excitement of a novel in spite of its scholarly precision.

¹¹² The official Twelver Shi'i view is that he did have a son, Muhammad, who disappeared as a child to become the expected Mahdi.

Here the old man gives sips of water to a man consumed by thirst, and hints that he knows where a spring is. It reminds much of the ways in which Socrates attracts the young by questions and never-completed arguments, and perhaps the Isma'ili leaders learned it from this source, just then becoming available. In any case, it shows how the Isma'ilis did propaganda while keeping their network secret: they draw people into their doctrines gradually, testing their readiness for the inner truth at each point on the path,¹¹³ until they swear an oath of loyalty. When the missionary Abu 'Abdallah al-Shi'i administers the oath to his first followers, he

'Swore them to silence, he laid his finger on their mouth.' To someone who had just been initiated, this gesture urgently conveyed the idea that he had now been entrusted with a perilous secret.¹¹⁴

All this shows the attraction of the doctrine of exoteric and esoteric Islam, the *zahir* and the *batin*, which the Isma'ilis made strangely public. Gossip spreads so fast, and classified material leaks so fast, because it is flattering to be let in on a secret, to join an elite united by superior knowledge—especially if you are a ragged tribesman in the mountains. As Halm says, "This secrecy was the distinguishing mark of the initiated, and naturally, the object of the curiosity and speculation of the uninitiated." The initiated formed a community set apart from the society, like Anabaptists or Bolsheviks; they called each other, and addressed each other, as brothers.

The first rebel bases

At the end of the century one Sa'id ibn Husayn, the great-grandson of the founder of the Isma'ili propaganda, had become the head of the organization. The missionaries sent out by a succession of leaders had established groups of followers all over the Muslim world, except near the secret headquarters in Salamiya, where Sa'id prudently refrained from propaganda. As the ninth Christian century turned into the tenth, rebellions took place in the most isolated of these places of *hijra*, of flight from the heathens, as Muhammad had fled from Mecca to Medina. By the year 903 four fortified towns have been established where the

¹¹³ From this comes the idea, apparently exaggerated, that the Isma'ilis had formalized stages of initiation into their doctrine.

¹¹⁴ Abu 'Abdallah al-Shi'i's autobiography quoted by Qadi al-Nu'man, in Halm, *Empire*, 43-44.

Isma'ili missionaries rule: in central Iraq, a day's march from the 'Abbasid capital, in Syria, in eastern Arabia where the oilfields now are, then called Bahrayn, in Yemen and in eastern Algeria. On the latter barren mountains the most fruitful seed had been scattered, the nucleus from which grew a great empire: the Fatimid Caliphate.

How the most successful missionaries, Abu 'Abdallah al-Shi'i and his brother, achieved this will show important regularities in Islamic extremist movements and lead into the crucial subject of how extremist movements change when they attain power. It is well described in Abu 'Abdallah's memoirs, as transmitted by another Isma'ili official of the time. The two brothers met the Kutama tribesmen on the pilgrimage to Mecca, where so many conspiracies have been begotten.

“In the course of his conversations Abu 'Abdallah kept on asking them about their country and the conditions in which their people lived. And from what they told him he could see that the region was favorable to his plans. He asked them, among other things, ‘How do you obey the supreme authority (*sultan*) and how does it rule over you?’ They replied, ‘our obedience and the [*sultan*’s] rule are limited to our saying: There is a *sultan*.’ ‘How far away from you is it?’ ‘A journey of ten days.’ ‘And are there fortified cities nearby?’ They said that there were, and named Mila, Satif and Bilizma, which they said lay in their district. He asked them whether the rulers of North Africa [*Ifriqiya*, that is, the amir of Qayrawan] had any governors there, and they said they did not. There were individual men, who ruled alone over the various cities, but these had nothing to do with the rulers, beyond having the prayer said for them in the pulpits; they were thus disobedient in their obedience to the government. ‘Then do you owe them obedience?’ ‘Not at all; they rather fawn on those of us who go to them, for we are superior to them in strength.’ ‘Then who rules over you?’ ‘Each of us has power over himself! We have great men in every tribe, and there are people among us who occupy themselves a little with scholarship, and there are also teachers whom we ask for advice in religious matters, and whom we summon to act as judges in our disputes. But if the judges pronounce a verdict against someone, then he takes what has been laid upon him as his own obligation. Were he

ever to oppose the verdict, the tribal assembly (*jama'a*) would rise up against him. Whatever we owe by way of tithe or alms-tax on our property, we bring of our own fee will, and give it to the poor among us.' 'And with all this, no authority has any leverage against you?' They said no, there was none. ... 'And are you a single tribe?' 'The name Kutama unites us, but we are divided into tribes, subtribes and clans.' 'Do you live far apart from one another?' 'There are no great distances separating us.' 'Then are you unified among yourselves?' 'No, we fight one another, and after someone has gained the victory, we join together again. Many of us live in peace with one group, while fighting another; that is our custom.' 'But if a stranger tries to force his way in among you, do you hold together?' 'No one has ever yet tried that!' 'And why not?' 'Because we are so many, and our country is so impassable.'..... For he had high expectations and hopes in them, whereas they had no inkling of what he wanted, and saw in all this – judging by the outward appearance, which was all they had before their eyes – nothing more than mere conversation. But he was content with everything he heard, and thought that with them he would arrive at his goal. ¹¹⁵

Unlike al-Qaeda, the Fatimid Mahdi, or messiah, had kept at a distance his first peasant and nomad followers in the 'Abbasid core area, who were too sanguine about what could be achieved in the short run with poorly organized military forces. He resisted their pleas to assume the leadership of their hasty revolt in Syria. Nor did he go to Iraq, the center of the evil Caliphate. Instead he followed the 'Abbasid approach to religious revolution that became a tradition in the Islamic world: to find a tribe in the hinterlands so ignorant of Islam that they will be convinced a radical variant is true Islam, then raising an army there that can conquer the center.

Tribesmen can serve as the spearhead of extremist Muslim movements because the rigor and complexity of their Islam is usually far beneath that of city-dwellers¹¹⁶—“there are

¹¹⁵ Dialogue between the propagandist Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i and Kutama Berbers, on the pilgrimage to Mecca, quoted by Halm, *Empire*, from Abu 'Abd Allah's memoirs, via Qadi Nu'man, 39-40; compare 23-29.

¹¹⁶ I cannot go here into the debate among anthropologists about the old generalization that tribally-organized (in anthropological jargon, “segmentary”) desert and mountain peoples have weak Islamic observance; it has been challenged by people studying the Pushtuns, for example. The mechanisms I describe above also prevail to

people among us who occupy themselves *a little* with scholarship”--and they feel ashamed of it. The urban intellectuals who propagandize them can make them feel it. As a result, they are easily convinced that a new sect constitutes the “real” Islam which they ought to have but do not. This accounts in large measure for the success of Taliban, and to some extent of al-Qaeda, in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and of the Somali Islamists. When tribesmen suddenly gain a unifying cause, overcoming the incessant feuds these Kutama describe, it interacts productively with their appetite for fighting and for plunder. When the *Ikhwan*, ignorant bedouin converted to Wahhabi fanaticism, rebelled against their Saudi kings at the end of the nineteen-twenties, their leaders made two kinds of complaints: some religious, the others about the suspension of raiding into Iraq. Finally, tribesmen are effective soldiers because they are not yet enervated by settled rule and by despotism, as Patricia Crone has emphasized following Ibn Khaldun. They have group solidarity, Ibn Khaldun’s *Asabiyya*. Nevertheless, the loyalty or enthusiasm of tribesmen tends to be fickle, leading to the cyclical rhythms of Islamic history described by Ibn Khaldun, and moderating movements or bringing on crises that can re-radicalize them.

When the leader of Isma’ili movement achieved such successes in creating bases, with such potential for taking over the whole Islamic world, he glimpsed the heady possibility of universal rule. With it he had to face the expectation that his conquests would usher in the messianic age led by the hidden Imam, Muhammad ibn Isma’il, returned to men’s presence. A hidden Imam with more-than-human qualities had to appear. The head of the organization, Sa’id ibn Husayn, chose instead, at the moment before the rebellions were to begin all over the Muslim world, to change his name and his claimed ancestry in order to claim the Messianic role. In a dramatic scene where he was introduced to one of his missionaries from behind a curtain, Sa’id ibn Husayn announced to his most important followers that he himself was the heir of a line of Imams descended from ‘Ali and Muhammad through Isma’il, and was himself the *mahdi* or messiah. Henceforth we will call him the Mahdi, following Heinz Halm. As yet this was not a public matter; what identity he would adopt in public was an open question. Thus the leading Isma’ili extremists were

different degrees among different ethnicities. It has been particularly true of Arab bedouins, Kurds, Pushtun, Anatolian Turkmen, northeast Caucasian mountaineers, Berbers, Fulani, and Somalis.

directed by their leader to a sudden, explosive de-radicalization of their doctrine and expectations, like the ‘Abbasid but more abrupt—apparently to deal with the anticipated problems of ruling the empire he hoped to gain.

In Syria an ephemeral Fatimid state was set up, where the Friday sermon was read and coins struck in the Mahdi’s name (903). In 909 San’a, the traditional capital of Yemen, was taken by the Isma’ili rebels. With the Kutama Berbers of present-day Little Kabylia, in eastern Algeria, the peripheral approach succeeded even more brilliantly. The Mahdi’s propagandist, Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Shi’i, welded his tribesmen into an army that conquered nominally ‘Abbasid Algeria and Tunisia, finally succeeding in 909 in founding a powerful state centered in Tunisia, which when joined by the Mahdi from his hiding became the Fatimid Caliphate. As we will see, the Fatimid Caliphate was eventually to take over Libya, Egypt (in 969), and a wealthy, cosmopolitan land at the heart of Islam which became their new center, as well as the Hijaz, Palestine, and Syria. This, even more than the ‘Abbasid resort to Khurasan, was the triumph of the extremist peripheral strategy into which the Kharijites were first forced.

To be the ruler of an empire the Mahdi had to have a public identity, beginning with a name. Heinz Halm brilliantly explains his solution:

In the first Friday sermon and in his chancery letter, the Mahdi had presented himself as *‘Abdallah Abu Muhammad*, thus as “‘Abdullah the father of Muhammad.” Now we know, however, that his real name was Sa’id b. al-Husayn. The meaning of this change in name becomes clear when we also take into account the name under which his son appeared. From now on the son, whose real name was ‘Abd al-Rahman, is called only Abu l-Qasim Muhammad. With the addition of the usual patronymic “son of ‘Abdallah” to this name, he thus becomes *Abu l-Qasim Muhammad b. ‘Abdallah*. But this is nothing other than the full name of the Prophet Muhammad....According to old prophecies, the awaited Mahdi, the renewer of the Prophet’s mission, will also bear name of the Prophet. So now it turns out that the bearer of this name is not the Mahdi, but rather *his son*, and that the promised savior is thus not the Mahdi himself,

but rather his son. A significant change in the doctrine announces itself in the name assumed by the Mahdi, a change which at first remains unexpressed, but which cannot remain concealed to the alert observer. The Mahdi therefore tried from the beginning to divert the expectation and hopes of the faithful away from himself and toward his son, the future successor to the throne. In this way time could be put off for yet a while....Now the title applied to [the Mahdi] in the Friday sermon, *al-imam al-mahdi billah*, means only “the imam rightly guided by God.” The word *al-mahdi* thus becomes a mere appositional adjective; the title “Mahdi” becomes a simple regnal title. Such as the caliphs of Baghdad also bore; “The Mahdi” becomes the imam and caliph ‘Abdallah al-Mahdi billah; he is demoted thereby to the role of yet one more in the series of rightful imams, a precursor of the still-expected promised One.¹¹⁷

Of course, the other thing that a Shi’ite claimant to the rule has to do is to show that he is a descendant of ‘Ali and Fatima, which was not easy. There were successive and contradictory genealogies produced,¹¹⁸ which met with much scepticism in Shi’ite circles not radical enough to be attracted by the first long-lasting Shi’ite seizure of power. So the Fatimids were pursued by questions about their legitimacy even more than the ‘Abbasids. The ‘Abbasids really were collateral descendants of Muhammad’s family, while it is questionable whether the Fatimids were ‘Alids, descendants of ‘Ali, at all.

As with the ‘Abbasids, the Fatimids show conspicuously the need for, or temptation to, a sudden and sharp de-radicalization for the achievement of worldly rule. How are we to understand this strange compulsion, so different from the behavior of Lenin or Hitler?

Reasons for Early De-radicalization

One possibility is that the men placed on the throne by the ‘Abbasid and Fatimid revolutions were opportunists who wanted to enjoy the fame and wealth to which political power, at this time and place, was the surest path. This is not to be excluded in the case of al-

¹¹⁷ Halm, *Empire*, 154-55.

¹¹⁸ Halm, *Empire*, 156-159; for the complex issues involved see Daftary, *Isma’ilis* 2, 57, 73, 79, 83, 96, 100-01, 104, 185.

Saffah, who reached the throne by accident when the ‘Alids refused to accept the throne, Ibrahim the ‘Abbasid was killed by the Umayyads, and the impatient Khurasanis, acting to forestall further negotiations by Abu Salama, seized on the nearest ‘Abbasid to whom homage might be paid in Kufa. It is still more conceivable in the case of the family that from the position of mere propagandists for a hidden *mahdi* became kings themselves as the Fatimid Caliphs. It is unlikely that they were descendents of ‘Ali, though they might have traced themselves to his brother, and their elaborate efforts to falsify their genealogy and change the identity of the expected *mahdi* suggest much manipulation.

Against such an interpretation is the effort, far greater than those of the ‘Abbasids, later expended by the Fatimids on the development of Isma’ili theology and law, together with their extensive propaganda effort in lands that did not yet acknowledge them. As Farhad Daftary explains,

The Da’wa [missionary] activities of the Fatimids, in contradistinction to that of the ‘Abbasids, were retained after their victory and became even more organized and extensive, especially following the transference of the Fatimid capital to Cairo. This was presumably because the Fatimids never abandoned hope of establishing their rule over the entire Muslim world. Consequently, the Isma’ili *da’wa* persistently aimed at convincing Muslims everywhere that the Fatimid Isma’ili Imam...was the sole rightful leader of mankind, and that all other dynasties had been usurpers.¹¹⁹

Daftary is quite right that the Fatimids had a new problem because their advent split the Muslim world as the Protestant Reformation split Europe. Until the Fatimids, one dynasty had ruled the “House of Islam” in principle; the exceptions were ephemeral control by rebels during civil wars or provincial governors, like the Tahirids and Saffarids in the East, who had established their independence for practical purposes but continued to acknowledge the ‘Abbasid Caliph as Commander of the Faithful or universal ruler—which is more important from the Muslim point of view. The Umayyads had established an independent Emirate in Spain when they were overthrown by the ‘Abbasids, but they did not claim the Caliphal title until the Fatimids had set the example.

¹¹⁹ Daftary, *Isma’ilis* 2, 213; for the *da’wa* generally see 213-237.

To explain this fully, it is worth citing a particular clear explanation from Heinz Halm:

The Empire of the Mahdi was no more a “State,” in the modern sense of the term, than were all the other political structures of its time, whether in the East or the West. A state is defined through its territory, its people and its power; for this it is essential that the state power extend over the entire people, and that it penetrate the territory uniformly. Here this is out of the question. The Fatimid caliphate is a dominion which rests upon family’s claim to an inheritance, and upon the charisma of a divine mission which is connected to that inheritance. Since this claim is universal, it can be raised in Ifriqiya just as well as in the Yemen or in India; where the Mahdi comes forward is a matter of indifference. In North Africa the Fatimids are strangers, and their rule is not – like that of most Western princes – tied to the traditions of a particular country. Since in theory all men are subjects of the Mahdi, a demarcation of the people of his State, against other peoples of other States, makes no sense. The caliph of Baghdad and the amir of Cordova also rule — unrightfully — over Muslims; but the Mahdi is the ruler of *all* the faithful.¹²⁰

From this clarifying digression I return to explanations of the Mahdi’s sudden deradicalization of Isma’ilism. Al-Saffah and the Fatimid Mahdi might have moderated suddenly to avoid the demand for miracles. As an educated man who lived in areas where Greek philosophy was spreading and becoming part of obligatory culture, the self-proclaimed Mahdi may not have believed in the possibility of miracles or that he had what was necessary to perform them. (This seems less likely in the ‘Abbasid case, which occurred prior to the introduction of philosophy into Muslim culture.) The Mahdi showed a surprising anxiety as a result about the legitimacy of the movement. The Fatimid Isma’ili Caliphs suffered not only the problem of a declared messiah who arrived without miracles, but also of having changed their names and genealogies in the attempt to sustain their very questionable descent from ‘Ali and Muhammad, a fatal flaw for Shi’ites. Among the results was the fact that the

¹²⁰ Halm, *Empire*, 264-265.

new messiah, the first Fatimid Caliph, Sa'id who called himself by the name 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi bi'llah, never left the walls of his palace after publicly assuming that title, suggesting that he felt an anxiety about his legitimacy. An important conclusion of the study was how sensitive extremist movements and states are to worries about their legitimacy.

There is also the third explanation that all revolutions stir excessive expectations which must be somehow retracted when the phase of ordered government begins. The thesis of the need for a revolutionary "thermidor" was popularized by Crane Brinton in the nineteen-thirties in what is still the best-known book on revolution, but in an exaggerated form appropriate to that cynical age.¹²¹ Of the movements considered in this study, or parallel with it, a compromise with conservative necessities of rule can be observed in the 'Abbasid and Isma'ili cases, and in the English revolution of 1642-1660; we will see that it is only true of Soviet Communism by a contrived argument, unless one extends the revolution to last for decades. The Qarmati Isma'ilis of eastern Arabia and Iraq did not show this pattern, and it does not apply well to the Nizarian Isma'ilis of Iran and Syria either. We will discuss these cases shortly.

Another, fourth, possibility is that the successful revolutionary chiefs of state de-radicalized to avoid sharing power with the revolutionary propagandists and military leaders who had brought them to power by spreading extreme ideas. Certainly a sudden moderation offered a perfect justification for getting rid of those who had brought them to power. But as Hitler and Stalin showed, destruction of part of those who brought you to power is quite compatible with a continued radical agenda.

The opportunist explanation is most reasonable in connection with a fifth, that the revolutionary chiefs of state, as wealthy and prestigious members of small elites, had an emotional and practical stake in the existing social order and were made uncomfortable by far reaching religious programs that potentially shook up existing class relationships, and quickly moderated their ruling agendas to maintain the social order. This is a plausible account for some Kings, like England's Richard II and the Emperor Charles V, but is clearest

¹²¹ Crane Brinton, *Anatomy of Revolution*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

in the case of Oliver Cromwell, who had turned against the Parliament that he had supported for the sake of the Independents, that is, the democratically organized Puritan congregations that sought partial toleration, but then suppressed in turn the Levellers, Fifth Monarchy Men, and other Independents who sought an egalitarian and democratic order. But medieval Islam was arguably more radical than medieval and early modern Christendom, its leaders less conventional. Mukhtar, the ‘Abbasids (with regard to the status of non-Arabs), the Qarmati leaders of Bahrayn, and Hasan II of Alamut and his successors (as we will see) acted as the sponsors of a radical reordering of social relationships and even sex roles.

When the Mahdi normalized his extremist movement, he bound the notables of his new kingdom to him by splendid gifts and formed a luxurious court on the traditional Middle Eastern pattern. In less than a year the ascetic *da'is* who had converted the Kutama and the Kutama themselves, rude men who looked down on the effete refinements of the cities, were growing dissatisfied.¹²² They sniffed out luxury, alcoholic drinks, and pederasty. One can assume that they also objected to the Mahdi's style of arbitrary rule, taken for granted in the Middle East, but new and galling among the informal democracy of the Berbers. Underlying everything was the shock of finding the messianic age so different than they had been taught. While the details are unclear or contradictory, reproaches were made, the Mahdi challenged to show it, and a conspiracy born. The leadership was offered to Abu ‘Abdallah al-Shi’i, who apparently refused it. Abu ‘Abdallah and his brother Abu’l ‘Abbas were tricked by the Mahdi and murdered at his palace. The final result of the Mahdi's de-radicalization was a revolt (ca. 912) by the Kutama Berbers, who set up a counter-Mahdi, then another. In an outbreak in 921, converts to Isma'ilism proclaimed “that all forbidden things were henceforth to be permitted. They had open eaten pork and drunk wine in the middle of Ramadan.”¹²³ Such abrogations of Islamic law were a possibility that was to accompany Isma'ilism everywhere like a shadow. At least some of these enthusiasts implied that “the Fatimid [Caliph] is the reincarnation of God on earth,” anticipating the Druse sect, which reappeared a century later in the reign of al-Hakim.

¹²² For these events see Halm, *Empire*, 159-172. For once it seems that Halm, in arranging his material into a vivid story, may have squeezed too much from dubious sources.

¹²³ Halm, *Empire*, 247-248.

We can make, from this and the ‘Abbasid case, the generalization that where the leaders of extremist movements de-radicalize them after attaining power, it often results in splits. The Parliamentary victory in the English civil war (1642-1646) also had this result. And, when followers split, the dissidents often become more radical. It is also a good opportunity to make some hypotheses about the relationship between a leader and his followers at such moments.

The Da’is: the role of the ideological missionary

The revolt against the Mahdi was led by his own missionaries. Reflecting on this fact enables us to form a hypothesis about how relations between leader and led affect the development of extremism. The Isma’ilis produced an autobiographical literature unique in its time and its place. Obviously the inception, incredibly rapid success and sudden victory of the Isma’ili revolution was a miraculous adventure for the men involved in it, one marked by the finger of God himself but also distinguished from the accustomed urban life of religious Muslims by personal adventure and personal achievement. To understand why, we need to dwell for a moment on atmosphere created by despotism in the Islamic world. The ‘Abbasid Caliphs with the executioners who trailed them created, like Stalin, a zone of fear around them. As Tacitus was the first to explain in his *Brutus* and *Agricola*, a general’s success against the Barbarians as brings caution and worry into his life because any hint of sudden success in a subject worries the emperor; even achievement in public speaking was discouraged. Autocratic rule, over time, discourages individual enterprise and achievement. In the community created by Muhammad, political life became the endless struggle of court factions for the favor of the Caliphs, with the heads of the losing factions, like the proverbial Barmecides, often killed. It was dangerous to express independent opinions, above all if they united political and religious themes; quite a few Shi’ite Imams, Sufis and judges paid the ultimate price for it. Public life was gradually killed by the autocracy of the Caliphs. But the passivity of despotism was never an entirely comfortable attitude for Muslims; the founding drama of Muhammad’s religion was fearless advocacy, fighting and dying for religion.

The Ismai'ili *da'wa*, the missionary enterprise, freed some of the subjects of the 'Abbasids to relive the excitements that lay buried in the collective memory of Muslims. The Isma'ili propagandists had to be adventurers, risk-takers, enthusiasts who liberated their imaginations to colorfully describe for simple people the suffering of the Imams, the tyranny of the illegitimate Caliphs, and so forth. The successful propagandist is a rhetorician—think of insurgent politicians on campaign, or, for a better analogy, of preachers of religious revival like Savonarola, Luther, the Hassidic rabbis, or Jonathan Edwards. The role is one that *rewards extremism*, particularly in rhetoric and the presentation of principles, though it requires tactical prudence about when and where to preach, and in the Muslim case when and where to rebel. It must have been this opportunity for adventure and personal attention, when added to religious conviction and success, that bred the rich biographical literature of early Isma'ilism.

The incentives shaping the behavior of the *leader and organizer* of a politico-religious conspiracy are very different. The organizer, who in the 'Abbasid and Isma'ili cases, as well as the Bolshevik one, hoped to become a ruler, has to be a man who weighs the potential and the claims of various missionary propagandists. During the Russian Civil War, Lenin had to weigh the competing claims of Stalin and Trotsky from different places and compose their quarrels. The Ismai'li Mahdi had to weigh the opportunities and risks presented by his *da'is* Zakaroye in Syria, Ibn Hawshab (Mansur al-Yaman) in Yemen, and Abu 'Abdullah al-Shi'i in North Africa; he decided to do nothing for the Syrian rebellion, supported the Yemeni one, and went himself to North Africa to turn a revolt into a state. Decisions of this kind require a certain moderation even from an extremist leader. Such a leader is also concerned from the beginning about establishing a state and ruling it successfully, and thus he is forced to have greater foresight than his *da'is*.

These reflections suggest the hypothesis that missionaries and propagandists in a winning extremist movement tend, other things being equal, to be more extreme than the leader. Depending how tightly controlled a movement is, this tension can lead to splits. If it does not, the missionaries and propagandists are likely to exert a pressure towards radicalization; whether it prevails depends on the specific circumstances.

When the threat of this huge revolt was overcome the Caliph responded with a further deradicalization, making his rule easier for Sunnis. A more important response, by which the Mahdi tried to cope with the supernatural expectations of his missionaries and followers, was now undertaken by investing his son, whose name he also changed, with some of the traditional trappings of a *mahdi*, including the “regnal name” al-Qa’im bi-amr Allah, “the one who rises up with the help of God,” to finally crush injustice and erring belief. We have encountered the word and concept al-Qai’im before, but to understand the Mahdi’s new attempt to legitimize his regime through his son we should discuss it further. The term *qa’im* is a noun derived from the verb to stand or rise. As ‘Ali Amir-Moezzi interprets it, it is a complex term meaning among other things: the standing, one who stands up, one who rises, the resurrector....The latter title, which among the Imamis gradually replaced that of Mahdi, was employed in Shi’ite circles to designate the Imam who “stood up” to fight against unjust and illegitimate power. In this sense, it contrasted with *qā’ed*, literally “the seated one,” a term designating previous imams who did not participate in rebellious movements against Umayyad and ‘Abbasid rule.¹²⁴

Another derivative of the verb is *qiyama*, resurrection, meaning normally the one that happens at the end of history, but applied by some Isma’ilis to the Utopian moment when Islamic law is superseded.

The Qarmati-Fatimid split

Most of the Isma’ilis in Iraq and points east rejected the de-radicalization and remained loyal to the original apocalyptic teaching, expecting the imminent arrival of a supernatural messiah, and came to be called Qarmatis from their founder in Iraq, the missionary Hamdan Qarmat. Many groups of early Isma’ilis show how deradicalization can result in splits, and how pressing the temptation often is, after a split, to return to the most radical teaching, in this case the immediate abolition of the Islamic law or the ascription of divinity to its leaders. The Qarmatis of the Persian Gulf, after dominating most of Arabia,

¹²⁴ Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Islam in Iran,” section vii: “The Concept of Mahdi in Twelver Shi’ism,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. Cf. Wilferd Madelung, “Kā’im Āl Muhammad,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v.

proclaimed the arrival of the Mahdi (Messiah) in the person of a slave, in 930, said he was “my God and your God,” cursed ‘Ali, used the Qu’ran for toilet paper, looted the Kaaba and stole the sacred Black Stone away to their capital in al-Hasa.¹²⁵ Clearly the Qarmatian Isma’ilis expected the end of Islam at the end of the seventh subcycle of the seventh cycle and the unveiling of the esoteric natural religion. According to some hostile sources, the choice of the year 316 of the Hijra was determined by Zoroastrian prophecies predicting the fall of Islam and the restoration of Zoroastrianism 1,500 years after Zoroaster. These and similar events elsewhere show *the liability of extremist movements to sudden reversals of doctrine and practice*. They very much remind of the vandalizing of sacred images and relics in the early phases of the Protestant Reformation. Beyond their doctrinal basis, they show the fury of people who learn they have been deceived by a false religion and want to release themselves from its hold. The expected Mahdi’s erratic and murderous behavior caused him to be killed in turn, with the leaders who had proclaimed him confessing to making a big mistake. These bizarre events decisively weakened the *military* threat of the Qarmatis, showing that some groups are too extreme to retain their expansionist momentum. But they did not end radical Qarmati rule in the Gulf region, which endured prosperously for over a century. The consequences of intransigent radicalization give some justification to the Caliph who took the opposite course and founded a great empire.

Further Development of the Fatimid Caliphate

The Fatimid Caliphate developed as a normal autocratic Middle Eastern monarchy, with two exceptions. Unlike the ‘Abbasids, the Fatimids kept the distinctive teaching that had powered the revolution, in a de-radicalized form, and devoted great efforts to developing and teaching it within the elite only—the general public was left to Sunnism. And the Fatimids maintained a very active policy of expansion both by fighting and by spreading the Fatimid ideology, with the ‘Abbasid Caliphate as a particular target. Al-Qa’im was succeeded by al-Mansur bi-Nasr Allah (946-953), and then by Al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah (953-

¹²⁵ For the happenings in eastern Arabia there are worse sources, so I treat them more briefly. This is based on the most important scholarly study, Wilferd Madelung, “Fatimiden und Bahrainqarmaten,” *Der Islam*, Vol. 34, 34-88; Daftary *Ismailis* 2, 147-152, and Halm, *Empire*, 250-263. I am grateful to Nino Chkhikvadze for assistance with German materials.

975), in whose reign Egypt was conquered (969). This conquest, a contrast to the declining curve of most Islamic empires, made the Fatimids a great world power and an effective rival to the now very decadent 'Abbasids for domination of the Islamic community. Al-Mu'izz was succeeded by al-Aziz bi'llah (975-996).

The extremist heritage of the Fatimids revived only with the mysterious and erratic Caliph Abu 'Ali al-Mansur al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, "Abu 'Ali, the Victor, the Wise with the Help of God," 996-1021. Al-Hakim displayed in his own life an oscillating pattern of whims, sometimes favoring the Christians, at other times making them carry heavy crosses. Hostile chroniclers of his time sometimes attribute this trait to mental illness, as do some modern scholars. This view is properly questioned by Halm and Daftary,¹²⁶ but requires further reflection. Some extremist movements and states where insanity is less an issue show an oscillating pattern of moving between extremes, such as the Soviet Union from Lenin through Gorbachev and the Nizarian Isma'ili Imamate in Iran (considered shortly). One simple explanation of this pattern is that a movement to one extreme costs in practical terms, resulting in a movement to the opposite extreme. A few years into his reign he allowed some Isma'ili religious innovators from the East to begin spreading a new interpretation of the faith according to which al-Hakim was himself divine, in other words returning to the supernatural, eschatological interpretation of the *mahdi* doctrine abandoned by the founder of the dynasty, in a new version.¹²⁷ An important lesson of these extremist movements is that *superseded phases, extreme or moderate, accompany a movement like a shadow that may become active in the future.*

Three successive preachers came to Cairo preaching the divinity of al-Hakim, al-Farghani, Hamza, and al-Darazi. All three came from the East, then gradually being lost by the 'Abbasid Caliphate, from Persia and Central Asia. This area was the most fertile source of philosophical and religious innovation in medieval Islamic history. Al-Farghani, was al-Hakim's close companion. The Caliph, according to a letter critical of al-Farghani by the

¹²⁶ Heinz Halm, *Die Kalifen von Kairo*, (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003) is the continuation of his outstanding history of the Fatimids, but has not been translated. I thank Nino Chkhikvadze for obtaining this book in Germany.

¹²⁷ Daftary, *Isma'ilis* 2, 186-190, argues that al-Hakim never countenanced this agitation, but such an argument seems implausible in an autocracy where ideology was so crucial.

Eastern Isma'ili missionary and ideologist al-Kirmani, al-Hakim “called him to him and gave him luxurious and honorable robes and allowed him to ride with him.” Al-Kirmani goes on to say that al-Hakim’s attitude is explained by the Qu’ran, 3:178, “We [God] only give them [those who disbelieve] rein that they may grow in sinfulness. And theirs will be a shameful doom.” In his authoritative book *Die Kalifen von Kairo*, Halm explains:

This passage proves what historians of those times tell, namely, the Caliph observed the actions of the heretics for a long time without doing anything. This was followed by very wide and quick expansion of the false doctrines among the followers of Isma'ilism. The Imam [al-Hakim] was shrouded in silence, and this behavior gave rise all the time to speculations.¹²⁸

Does this mean that al-Hakim approved or disapproved of the new teaching? His earlier oscillation in several respects provides a clue: al-Hakim already had experimented with more than one type of religious extremism. Perhaps one can learn something from the behavior of other ideological extremist rulers. It is common in the post-Soviet countries, with some Soviet precedent, for autocratic rulers to allow their largely powerless Prime Ministers to decide many policy issues. Then, when something goes wrong, the Prime Minister is blamed for it and dismissed. This is a means of preserving the authority of the autocrats. More striking is the case of Stalin, who after World War II retreated from active and public sponsorship of policy; he made only nine public statements before his death, including cryptic texts like *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics* whose purpose puzzled many people. Meanwhile, Stalin’s Politburo lieutenants were constructing their own policy positions out of the materials provided by Stalin’s quite different policies at various times.¹²⁹ In other words, Stalin retreated in public to the status of a god whose precepts are disputed by theologians on the basis of sacred texts. Such behavior provided pretexts for the future destruction of unwanted leaders—Beria, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Molotov—while elevating the authority of Stalin as high as a human being’s can be raised.

¹²⁸ Halm, *Kalifen*, 284-285.

¹²⁹ See the important article by Nathan Leites, “Politburo Images of Stalin,” *World Politics*, 1949.

Perhaps al-Hakim was engaged in a similar process when he permitted the radical, anti-Muslim subtext of Isma'ilism to be voiced once again. The similarity of the new teaching to other radical moments in North Africa and particularly among the Qarmatis of Arabia became clearer as its next two exponents preached. Hamza, a Persian cloak maker, preached "the abolition of every type of fasting, prayer and pilgrimage."¹³⁰ In spite of public protests, the Caliph paid attention to Hamza and "asked him every time how many followers his doctrine had." Al-Darazi, the third teacher, was a Turk named Anustegin from Bukhara; his teaching developed into the Druze faith, which is hardly considered Muslim today. His followers defecated in mosques and urinated on the Qu'ran, recalling the Qarmatis of Arabia. This provoked the public, Darazi's house was stormed and he hid in al-Hakim's palace. The public gathered and demanded him; they received the message that al-Hakim had punished him with death. Halm, pointing out that al-Hakim never hinted at divinity in any of his decrees, concludes that "we will never find out whether the 'temptation of divinity' really captured al-Hakim."¹³¹ I think he was experimenting with it, seeing whether it could be floated. Why?

Insanity or vanity are obvious explanations, but perhaps al-Hakim thought that Isma'ilism was growing stale and might be revived by bringing forth its radical strand. It is an interesting coincidence that the 'Abbasids, the Fatimid Isma'ilis, the Nizarian Isma'ilis, the English Protestants, and the Soviet Communists all underwent major, surprising episodes of re-radicalization after periods of 67 (al-Ma'mun) to 111 (English Puritans) years after coming to power. There are so many special factors in each case that it is hard to make any solid inference, and the English case had been one of growing radicalization, not moderation before the most radical episode. Nevertheless, the observer of extremist movements ought to be open to the possibility of re-radicalization in their old age. Not, it is true, their very old age, because in each case except England, these were the *last* episodes of re-radicalization. Over a very long time, almost every extremist movement becomes moderate.

¹³⁰ Halm, *Kalifen*, 288.

¹³¹ Halm, *Kalifen*, 288.

At length, after whims including the executions of many officials, the Caliph wandered into the desert on one of his nocturnal rambles and was never seen again. The Druze, who continued the teaching that he was divine, assert that it was the beginning of his own *ghayba*. Al-Hakim's death ended extremist manifestations in the Fatimid Caliphate, which declined to an ignominious end in 1207.

The Nizarian Isma'ilis and assymetrical warfare

Over time, the Qarmatis in Iran became loyal to the Fatimid Caliphate, but split away again when a succession dispute divided that declining empire. A radical group believed that the disappeared pretender Nizar would return as the messiah.¹³² As in earlier cases, the split moved them to renewed activism. Unable to take over the Middle East, now largely in the hands of the Seljuk Turks, they seized certain castles in the mountains of Iran and Syria and used them as what Mao Zedong called "base areas." Casting about for a means of developing military power in spite of their small numbers, they were the first regime in history to consciously specialize in asymmetric warfare, an intelligent innovation which, like al-Qae'da, shows that small size may not render extremist groups less dangerous. They systematically infiltrated the courts and armies of their opponents and used the resulting intelligence to assassinate enemy heads of state and officials. We get from them the word "assassins." Like the Palestinians in a similar situation, they thus established themselves as a political force that had to be acknowledged and sometimes conciliated.

The Nizaris became widely feared and disliked, but it did not advance them closer to their desire of winning wider dominion. As Bernard Lewis argues, they were in danger of sinking into a heterodox provincial cult like so many in the Middle East. The result was a similar drama to the Qarmatis of the Gulf, but played out among Nizarian Isma'ilis in Iran and Syria. To restore the vigor of the movement, their Imam, Hasan II, interrupted the Ramadan fast in 1164 to announce, with a great feast, the Resurrection, interpreting it as the

¹³² These brief remarks are based on Ata Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, tr. John A. Boyle, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), Vol. 2; Daftary, *Isma'ilis 2*, 301-402; Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, (London, 1967); M. G. S. Hodgson, "The Isma'ili State," in A. K. S. Lambton et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971-), Vol. 5, 422-482.

abolition of the Islamic prohibitions and the status distinction between men and women, who wore the same clothes. After some years, these radical innovations themselves became familiar and tame, and a new Imam, Hasan III, ordered in 1211 the return to the Islamic law, but in its Sunni—that is, most status-quo—form. As the Shi'ite Imam, with total authority, he was obeyed. This history, like that of the Bolsheviks, again demonstrates that extremist movements face choices between the wondrous fulfillments held out by the imagination and political and religious normalization, between greater extremism and moderation. Neither solution is entirely satisfactory, so they can oscillate between extreme and moderate poles of conduct. Oscillation as marked as the Nizarian was unique among the religious *regimes* I studied, though common in Communist history. It may be conditioned by the small size and isolation of the Nizarian communities. In any case, by the time of its feeble surrender to the Mongols in 1256, the Nizarian Isma'ili state too had become moderate.

V: The Bolshevik Movement

When we approach moderation and extremism in Soviet history we face a completely different problem from the earlier case studies. In the Islamic movements we studied we saw a few crucial episodes, or even one, of moderation and radicalization. The whole of Soviet history, on the contrary, is a complex process of oscillation between extremes, with foreign and domestic policy more often pursuing very different cycles. For early Islamic history the sources are few and doubtful; for Soviet history we have too many, and too rich, to assimilate. In Islamic history we observe the behavior, if we are lucky, and are left to guess at the motives. With the collapse of the Soviet Union we now have detailed documents, archives, interviews, that enable us to observe the debate between moderate and extreme positions with the reasons that major leaders give for their stands.

Accordingly, I have chosen to concentrate on the period from the February Revolution in 1917 to the end of the civil war, when the Bolshevik party faced the hardest choices and made its most momentous decision: the decision to seize power without a popular majority, as shown in the last Soviet free election. This is arguably also the most radical period of Soviet history, but one in which the Party also submitted to humiliating concessions.

The collapse of Imperial Russia

World War I was such an exhausting and destructive experience, and the incapacity of the elites to win it in a timely way, end it, or limit it, so apparent, that there was bound to be a revolution in every country that lost it. The formal losers by peace treaties, Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, all experienced changes of regime, often with disintegration of the country. Two backward countries that had started on the winning side but lost many battles, Russia and Italy, also underwent revolutionary changes of regime. Extreme ideologies blossomed in many of these cases: beyond the Bolsheviks, Italian Fascists and Nazis we should name the Communist regimes that temporarily took power in Hungary, Slovakia and Bavaria and extremely anti-traditional, anti-Muslim Kemalism in Turkey—to say nothing of countries where extremist movements were strong but not

victorious. So here is a clear series of examples where the environment, in the form of a great war, determined the evolution of extremist movements. In some cases like the Bolsheviks the movements, to oversimplify, were already extreme; in others the war somehow produced fundamentally new *political formulae*, as in the case of Fascist Italy, the Nazis, and Kemalist Turkey.

By late 1916, the authority of the Imperial government had long since been eaten away by the defeats, by the scandalous influence at court of the filthy and lascivious faith healer Rasputin, by incompetent appointments and by rumors about the court's debauchery and treason. Ordinary people were suffering from galloping inflation and the disorganization of the economy, which had created food shortages and malnutrition in big cities. In late February women's demonstrations for bread, joined by dissatisfied workers, became increasingly political and grew and grew. The Emperor, with typically bad judgment, ordered order restored, and the police fired on the demonstrators. This enraged the crowds, and demoralized troops garrisoning the capital refused to fire on them, or joined them. With the loss of the means of coercion all control by the government was lost; the generals and the politicians of the Right informed the Tsar that he had to abdicate, which he supinely did. In the middle of a terrible war and ensuing economic crisis Russia was left without rulers.

Most of the public was filled with the heady joy of unexpected liberation; it was a moment of national solidarity and mystical rapture like moments in the late '60s in America and France. People looked out on a rosy dawn and were convinced that all their sundry desires would now be satisfied, while hostility, crime and selfishness would vanish from Russia. To the extent this chiliastic moment had a political content, it was socialism of some sort. The best, though imperfect, indication of the political preferences of the public in 1917 was the winter elections to the Constituent Assembly, the only free universal-suffrage elections held in Russia until 1991. As Evan Mawdsley notes, "What was striking about these overall returns was the strength of the *socialist* vote."¹³³ The parties of the pre-war Establishment, such as the liberal Kadets and the center-right Octobrists, got a bare five percent of the vote. The

¹³³ Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), 6. This intelligent and clear book, first published in 1987, remains the best overall work on the Civil War.

remaining ninety-five percent was either socialist or non-Russian nationalist, and most of these nationalist parties were socialist as well. The peoples of the Russian Empire had repudiated their past and chosen a socialist future. But what kind of socialist future would it be? As Mawdsley also notes, “it did not follow that socialism would take Bolshevik form.”¹³⁴

The February Revolution began the first of two periods, with 1990-93, when the state disintegrated in the former Soviet space. In Petrograd, the capital, a vast state bureaucracy remained and, more or less, did its accustomed work, but without anyone at the top to obey. In the provinces, all authority vanished more completely. In the recent words of Orlando Figes,

The provincial apparatus collapsed in most places like a house of cards, and it was only very rarely that armed force was necessary to remove it. The people simply took the streets; the governors, without any military means to suppress the disorders, were forced to resign; and *ad hoc* committees of citizens declared themselves in power....The police state similarly collapsed—the police being replaced by citizens’ militias almost overnight.¹³⁵

As in 1990-93, political forces and communities were faced with the call, or the opportunity, to organize governments on this vast ungoverned territory. In that sense, the Bolshevik “seizure of power” is a less unusual event than the polemics surrounding it at the time, and since, suggest. What made the Bolsheviks very unusual was their insistence on keeping the power they had found lying in the street, monopolizing it, and employing it ruthlessly and cruelly for further transformation. For the exultant revolutionaries were by no means eager to rule. Most of the liberals and socialists who had an opportunity to rule after the February Revolution were, in Figes’ phase, “reluctant revolutionaries.” The outstanding leaders were abroad or in Siberia, and took time to return; those who decided the country’s institutions in February were less important figures who lacked confidence. All these people had lived their lives under the Tsar’s absolute rule, so they—like the first non-communist Presidents after

¹³⁴ Mawdsley, *Civil War*, 8.

¹³⁵ Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, (London: Pimlico, 1997), 350. Figes offers the most convincing account of the period between the February and the October revolutions, and I have relied on him substantially in this section.

1991—had beliefs, but they had no idea how to put them into practice, and they were afraid of their own supporters from the poor, profoundly alien people whose lives they had not shared.¹³⁶ Ignorance and political inexperience can influence movements to hold to a moderate course.

Ideology can be a force for moderation

Perhaps the most potent cause of the socialist leaders' moderation was the very nature of Marxist ideology. Marxism is about history, which replaces philosophy as the source of guidance for understanding the best political order. History is a sequence of stages—slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism—each of which is inevitable, and whose sequence is inescapable, in the classic Marxist texts. The bourgeois revolution, ending absolute monarchy and the privileges of the noble estate, came in 1688 in England, 1789 in France, and in Russia only in February 1917 (given the very limited nature of the representative institutions created by the Tsar in 1906). Almost all Marxists expected a considerable time to elapse before the proletariat took power in a socialist revolution; Lenin had written during the war that he might not see the revolution during his lifetime. Only when a few Marxist leaders who were especially flexible, excitable or opportunistic, noticed the vacuum of power after February and the radical socialist mood of the “masses” did some of them turn to arguing that the Proletariat could take power at once. Chief among them were Lenin and Trotsky, as already in 1905.¹³⁷

American public debate as expressed in journalism incessantly uses the categories “pragmatists and ideologues.” The ideologues are always being condemned in this narrative; the phrase itself assumes that ideologues are extremists. We saw with the Shi'ism of late Umayyad and early 'Abbasid period that doctrine can moderate parties, depending what it is. This is more obvious in the February revolution. Lenin was a revisionist Marxist; the

¹³⁶ Figes, 323-335;

¹³⁷ Leon Trotsky, *Iskra*, no. 93, March 17, 1905, and Service, *Trotsky*, 90-91; *Lenin, April Theses; (Aprel'skaya) vserossiiskaya konferentsiya RSDRP (bol'shevikov), Petrogradskaya konferentsiya RSDRP (bol'shevikov) Aprel' 1917 goda: Protokoly*. (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1958), 67-68; N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revolyutsii*, (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), Vol. 2, Book 4, 171-72.

socialists were moderated by Marxism. As Trotsky says, liberals also compromised with socialism.

The first governmental, or quasi-governmental institution to be organized, on February 27, was a “Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies;” in a sad precedent, the Soviet itself, with Soldiers’ Deputies added and outnumbering the workers, appeared the day after its Executive. Based on the precedent of the 1905 revolution, such “Soviets” and the Executives made up of their Deputies sprang up like spring flowers all over Russia, and were soon joined by Soviets of Soldiers’ Deputies and by Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies. The Russian word “sovyet” means simply Council, and the repetition of the term Soviets by generations of historians has confused generations of students; it is kept here only because these Councils gave their name to the Soviet Union and nominally comprised the hierarchy of institutions that ruled the Soviet state, as opposed to the Party--and because Gorbachev attempted, disastrously, to revive them. The Soviets themselves were informal, unstable institutions of direct democracy of the Athenian type, formed typically by workers in a revolutionary factory, by troops—overwhelmingly of peasant origin--in units of the fraying army, or by peasants in their native regions. These Soviets elected Deputies who formed representative bodies which elected, in turn, Executives; the Deputies and their Executives turned out from the beginning to be mainly intellectuals, with a few professional revolutionaries of lower-class origin. The historians obscure the crucial fact that both the Soviets themselves and the Executives made up of their deputies were elected *only* by members of the relevant social classes; they vividly expressed the consciousness that the places where they were formed and the Russian Empire itself were *not communities*, but, in post-modernist academic jargon, structures of domination of one class over another—with the “subalterns” now taking power into their own hands. It is the *most fundamental fact* about the two Revolutions, the Civil War and the Soviet regime that emerged out of them that, in the view of the majority of the population in 1917, there was *no common good* between the exploiters and their victims. Accordingly, the regime founded by the Bolsheviks, while nominally popular and democratic, denied, by its very constitution, the vote to members of the exploiting class until 1936. This situation, expressive of the deep hatred between classes in Russian history, marks the extreme radicalism of the Russian Revolution not only in

comparison with the Islamic religious revolutions but also with the English, American and French revolutions.

Lenin, who had been living in Switzerland, returned courtesy of the German General Staff and coined the political slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” The real meaning of this slogan, given the exclusion from Soviet elections of the “exploiting classes,” was “No power to the exploiters,” or rather—they were a small minority anyway--“No participation by the exploiters.” As Lenin put it in his very first speech after seizing power:

Above all, the significance of this coup [*perevorot*] consists in the fact that we’ll have a Soviet government as our own organ of power without any participation whatsoever by the bourgeoisie.¹³⁸

The organization of the Petrograd Soviet did provoke the organization of a parallel governing body that, without being elected, claimed to somehow represent the whole population of the Russian Empire in all its diversity—the timorously named “Temporary Committee of Duma [Parliament] Members for the Restoration of Order in the Capital and the Establishment of Relations with Individuals and Institutions,” which became the Provisional Government. If the Soviets were lower-class and socialist, the Provisional Government was bourgeois; its members represented the liberal, anti-autocratic political establishment. Later, some moderate socialists were added; the nominal Socialist Revolutionary Aleksandr Kerensky became, in the summer, its Prime Minister. So Russia, like its emblematic eagle, had two heads: the Provisional Government that administered the bureaucratic hierarchy, or tried to, and the Petrograd Soviet that claimed not to rule but to watch the government and force on the Provisional Government certain decisions, like the famous Order No. 1 requiring every order to the Army to be confirmed by the Soviets. The result was the famous *dvoevlastiye*, or duality of power, which prevented any strong administration that could establish order in a disintegrating state and country. Although the Provisional Government continued to give orders to the bureaucratic network, similar

¹³⁸ Lenin, “Daklad o Zadachakh Vlasti Sovetov,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii V. I. Lenina*, (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958-65), v. 35, 2.

confusion of power existed in most regions of the Empire, where many localities simply formed their own quasi-governments or declared themselves to be independent republics. As Figs remarks, it was less a situation of *dvoevlastiye* than of “a deeper problem of the proliferation of a ‘multitude of local powers’ (*mnogovlastiye*).”¹³⁹

If the public mood was hopeful and extremist, the elites who took leading positions in the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet were apprehensive and moderate. Such phenomena are common in extremist movements; the local Berber militants of the Isma’ili movement rebelled in the name of the abolition of the Islamic law, while the Mahdi and his cosmopolitan followers were willing to wait. People who arrive newly in the political arena always confront an Establishment, whose goals and methods are often (but not always) relatively moderate. It may also be very isolated from the general population. During the First World War, the dominant elites in every country closed ranks behind waging the war until victory, while many ordinary people were wearied or disgusted by the war—a feeling that for the most part came to the surface only a decade later, with the popularity of antiwar literature and revisionist history. Upcoming leaders are immediately exposed to the temptations to join the dominant Establishment, which is more sophisticated and politically knowledgeable as well as richer and more fashionable. And, as Trotsky writes in one of his most brilliant chapters, the parvenus tend to defer to the elite they are suddenly joining:

Fundamentally we have here the almost instinctive movement which has compelled the small merchant or teacher to step aside respectfully in the stations or theaters to let a Rothschild pass. Doctrinaire disagreements [i.e. Marxist ideology] served as a compensation for the consciousness of a personal insignificance.¹⁴⁰

But the followers have no opportunity to join the old elite, and do not face these temptations. As a result, most of the liberal and moderate socialist elite in Russia rapidly excluded itself from effective politics after the February Revolution. As in 1933 in Germany, people who

¹³⁹ Figs, *People’s Tragedy*, 359.

¹⁴⁰ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Tr. Marx Eastman, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 123-124.

were virtually unknown to Russia and the world, such as Stalin, became, suddenly, numbered among the rulers of the country.

The inexperience of new arrived leaders

The new arrival of these individuals meant that they were very inexperienced in government and naïve about what it requires. Lord Beaverbrook once asked the fallen Kerensky why they did not make a separate peace with Germany, and Kerensky asserted that had they done so “we should be in Moscow now.” So why, probed Beaverbrook, didn’t you? “We were too naïve,” said Kerensky.¹⁴¹ This is normally true of extremist movements when they arrive in power, and it worth reasoning about the effects of such inexperience on the policies of rulers. To begin with, extremist activists are can be aware of their inexperience and intimidated by it, or unaware of it. The former feeling characterized the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who supported and participated in the Provisional Government, with the exception of the foolishly confident Kerensky, and probably many moderate Bolsheviks such as Kamenev and Zinoviev.

The other group of extremists consists of those who were unaware of their inexperience and naiveté. Lenin, a man extraordinarily lacking in self-awareness, was an astonishing example of this possibility. His naïve understanding of politics is on display in *State and Revolution*, thought out in exile and written while he was in hiding from the Provisional Government after July 1917. After the overthrow of the “capitalists and bureaucrats,” it is “quite possible...to proceed immediately, overnight, to supersede” officials in managing the economy by “the extraordinarily simple operations—which any literate person can perform—of supervising and recording, knowledge of the four rules of arithmetic, and issuing appropriate receipts.” Thus “all members of society... [will] have learned to administer the state themselves,”¹⁴² leading to the withering-away of the state.

¹⁴¹ Figes, *Tragedy*, 409.

¹⁴² Lenin, *Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiya*, towards the end of Chapter 5.

Before the uprising Lenin told a comrade, “Any workers will master any ministry within a few days, no special skill is required here....”¹⁴³

What are the consequences for the political behavior of these aware and unaware revolutionaries? Those aware of their inexperience are likely to be reluctant rulers, as the Mensheviks and SR leaders were, and to fear their followers who want them to rule. They are likely to lean on others, as these socialist leaders leaned on the Kadets (Constitutional Democratic Party) and Russia’s Entente allies. The unaware, like Lenin, are in contrast likely to take their beliefs as an excessive guide to practice. Throughout Lenin’s statements we find an exaggerated belief in the hostility of the domestic and foreign classes opposed to the revolution. To take just one example from the rich material explored by Leites, Lenin said in 1919 that:

The bourgeoisie of the whole world, with all its might, with enormous energy, intellect and determination, stopping at no crime...is preparing to suppress the proletariat in the impending civil war.¹⁴⁴

In fact, we will see in the civil war that most of Russia’s big capitalists, concentrated in Petrograd and Moscow, lived grumbling under the new Bolshevik regime which was stealing their property without ever doing anything effective to oppose it. Similarly the five Entente powers, controlled, for Lenin, by capitalists obsessively fearful of socialist revolution, carried out armed intervention against it, but hardly seriously; of more than twelve million men they had under arms when the war ended less than a tenth of one percent were used against the Bolsheviks, and these hesitantly, briefly, and ineffectively. Compare a man like Otto von Bismarck, the creator of unified Germany by ruthless diplomatic maneuvers and wars between 1864 and 1871. Bismarck’s guiding *realpolitik* understood political and human motives as darkly as Lenin’s ideology, but his long political experience as a Prussian

¹⁴³ Recollection of A.V. Shotman, cited in Service, *Lenin*, 301.

¹⁴⁴ “The Tasks of the Third International,” 1918, *Selected Works*, vol. 10, 48, cited in Leites, *Bolshevism*, 405. Similarly Lenin said at the end of World War I that “There now remains only one group...the British and French imperialists, which is preparing to divide up the whole world among the capitalists, has set itself the aim of overthrowing the Soviet regime in Russia at any cost.”¹⁴⁴ Leites, *Bolshevism*, 394.

diplomat and Minister gave him a more realistic approach to applying this cynical worldview. He could not help but observe that France (until 1870) and Britain had interests damaged by the rise of unified Germany, but did not do anything effective to oppose it. So he knew that theoretical threats do not necessarily materialize, and that he could make them less likely to realize themselves by his policies. Bismarck's political experience made him *less fearful*. In contrast, the Bolsheviks' inexperience fed the attitudes that appear to us paranoid, and their fears encouraged in turn their ruthlessness, hostility to the outside world, and cruelty.

This is an important result for our overall inquiry. One kind of *external influence* on extremist movements is an event, such as the Isma'ilis reacting to the hiding of the Imam, the Bolsheviks taking power in the midst of a world war, or their reaction to the rise of Hitler. Another sort which is much more subtle, but enormous in its impact, is underlying conditions such as their original political inexperience.

From February to September

The period between the February and September revolutions is not the most important for our purposes, but its broad tendencies are essential for our task. The first major change in the situation sketched above was the radicalization of the Bolshevik party. The initial wave of returns from exile left the consistently moderate. Lev Kamenev as the senior figure in Petrograd, and he went along with the Menshevik and SR strategy of accepting the "bourgeois revolution" of February and waiting a long time for a proletarian revolution. So this case shows how great the power of circumstances can be, at least in the short run, in overcoming the deeper tendencies of extremist movements. And the case of Kamenev, almost throughout his career a consistent moderate in an extreme party, shows the influence of personality on the extremism and moderation of movements. But it is the historic impact of Lenin that shows this more memorably. Lenin arrived in early April and changed that.

The April Theses: the tasks of the proletariat in the present revolution

The April Theses were published in the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* and read by Lenin at two meetings of the all – Russia Conference of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, on 4 April 1917. In the Theses, Lenin condemns the Provisional Government as bourgeois and urges:

No support for the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear, particularly of those relating to the renunciation of annexations. Exposure in place of the impermissible, illusions-breeding “demands” that this government, a government of capitalists should *cease* to be an imperialist government

Lenin recognizes that the Bolsheviks are minority in most of the soviets:

As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticizing and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers Deputies, so that people may overcome their mistakes by experience.¹⁴⁵

Lenin calls for:

Abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy. i.e. the standing army to be replaced by the arming of the whole people.¹⁴⁶

Confiscation of all landed estates...It is not our *immediate* task to “introduce” socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the *control* of the Soviets of Workers Deputies.¹⁴⁷

The salaries of all officials, all of whom are elective and displaceable at any time, not to exceed the average wage of a competent worker.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Published in *Pravda*, No. 26, 7 April 1917, Connor, *Lenin*

¹⁴⁶ Published in *Pravda*, No. 26, 7 April 1917, Connor, *Lenin*.

¹⁴⁷ Published in *Pravda*, No. 26, 7 April 1917, Connor, *Lenin*.,

¹⁴⁸ Published in *Pravda*, No. 26, 7 April 1917, Connor, *Lenin*.

Lenin's demands on the Bolshevik Party, means to the above policy, are the following:

- (a) Immediate convocation of a Party Congress;
- (b) Alteration of the Party Program, mainly:
 - (1) On the question of imperialism and the imperialist war;
 - (2) On attitude towards the state and demand for a "common state".
 - (3) Amendment of out-of-date minimum program.
- (c) Change the name into The Communist Party.

It is clear, that Lenin takes a very extreme position, that the Provisional Government should be discarded – he does not say how – and Russia should be ruled by only part of its people.

The second important change was the increasing impatience and radicalism of the popular mood. The rebelling peoples of the Empire found that the February Revolution had not fulfilled their huge and quite diverse hopes—a common mechanism in revolutions. A revolutionary atmosphere opens up hope for the amendment of all our dissatisfactions. But in a diverse modern society these dissatisfactions contradict each other: peasants wanted to get the gentry's land while the gentry wanted an elected constitutional government that would safeguard their property rights. The diversity of desires in itself means that revolutionary governments cannot easily satisfy the hopes placed in them. In addition, the efficiency of government work is normally disrupted by revolution; a revolutionary government faces rising demands with decreasing means to satisfy them. As a result, the public tends to become more and more dissatisfied, and will give its support to more and more extreme groups, who tend to prevail in the short run. The 'Abbasids and Fatimid Isma'ilis established moderate regimes, so that many of their disgruntled supporters turned to Isma'ilism or the Qarmatis respectively. In the English revolution, the moderate Presbyterian and monarchist Parliamentarians had to yield to the republicans and believers in religious toleration led by Cromwell, who emerged as dictator. In the French revolution, successively more radical groups of revolutionaries were purged by the Jacobins, ending in the dictatorship of Robespierre. In revolutionary Russia it was the Bolsheviks who, after April 1917, who were

the most extreme party, an enormously advantageous position to hold in the first stages of a revolution.

Public impatience grew with the increasingly obvious failure of the Provisional Government and its passive supporters in the Petrograd Soviet to establish its legitimacy and to solve any of the country's growing problems. The Provisional Government suffered hugely from not being elected, and allowed the planning of elections for a "Constituent," or Constitution-making, Assembly elected by the whole nation—which would have had far more legitimacy—to lag and lag. The other great objection to the Provisional Government was the ongoing war, underlined by a disastrous attempt at an offensive in June. By October, the Provisional Government had little authority left. Thus the public pinned less and less hopes on the liberal Establishment in the Provisional Government and on their moderate socialist allies in the Petrograd Soviet. As a result, the most extreme party got more and more support. The Bolsheviks became this party. Early in September the Bolsheviks gained a majority in the Petrograd Soviet sufficient to install, on September 25, Lev Trotsky, who had now joined the Bolsheviks, as its leader. Similar events were happening in Moscow and a number of other places, particularly in the northwest of European Russia and in the adjoining military Fronts, including the radical Baltic Fleet. Such changes were due as much to radical sympathizers from other parties as to committed Bolsheviks.

The period between the end of August and the October (old calendar, our November) revolution is worth examining in greater detail for its phases of moderation and radicalization, because the outcome was the Bolshevik seizure of power. The conflicting pushes and pulls of an ambiguous, rapidly evolving political situation, as seen through the lens of the Bolshevik Operational Code, resulted in many shifts from moderation to extremism, or vice-versa, on the part of the Party or its powerful leaders, such as Lenin and Kamenev. A moderately detailed history of this period will serve as a sample of the detailed fluctuations between extremism and moderation found in other periods.

At the end of August the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Lavr Kornilov, moved troops toward Petrograd, an act interpreted by the wide swaths of the lower classes and many

socialists as the long-feared “counterrevolution.” Just what lay behind this act, whether it was an attempt by Kerensky to use the army against the rebellious workers and soldiers and the Bolsheviks, or an attempted coup by Kornilov, or some mixture of the two, has been much debated by historians. Whatever the correct answer, the event served to discredit Kerensky, the Provisional Government, and the moderate leadership of the Soviets who were seen as not opposing it vigorously. The crisis speeded up the process of the arming and training of the workers, which worked to the advantage of the Bolsheviks.¹⁴⁹

During the crisis Lenin, who was in hiding from the Provisional Government, backed it against the “counterrevolution.” On September 1 he wrote urging the restoration of the slogan “all power to the Soviets,” but moderately joined it with an assertion that the “peaceful development of the revolution” was possible.¹⁵⁰ Robert Service, the best biographer of Lenin, judges this position to be insincere, but it was supported by detailed and plausible reasoning:

Events have been developing with such incredible, storm- or hurricane-like velocity, that it can by no means be the task of the Party to speed them up...we must explain to the people that the situation is extremely critical, that every action may cause an explosion, and therefore a premature uprising may cause the greatest harm.¹⁵¹

It sounds as though Lenin was anxious about losing new, post-coup attempt support among the Mensheviks and SRs, which he estimated at “about two-fifths” of their members, and perhaps about triggering another coup attempt or suppression of the Bolsheviks by the Provisional Government. He may have also accepted a widespread socialist fear, that like its only precedent, the Paris Commune of 1871, an armed takeover in the capital would be isolated and overwhelmed by hostile forces in the rest of the country. Lenin now agreed with Kamenev in seeking to give power to the Soviets, but in the form of a coalition government of socialist parties.

¹⁴⁹ For the Kornilov coup see Figes, *People's Tragedy*, 465-466; Service, *Lenin*, 299-300; Trotsky, *Russian Revolution*, 589-592.

¹⁵⁰ “On Compromises,” *PSS*, Vol. 34, 135; cf. 138-9.

¹⁵¹ Service, *Lenin*, 300; Lenin, “Draft Resolution on the Present Political Situation,” written not later than September 3, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress, 1977), vol. 25, 315-322.

Lenin's oscillation between extremes

On September 12 Lenin suddenly abandoned his moderate position, writing to his Central Committee colleagues that “taking power immediately, both in Moscow and Piter [slang for Petrograd]...we will *absolutely and undoubtedly* be victorious.”¹⁵² This letter was the first of a series of increasingly urgent and desperate appeals from his hiding-places for an armed rebellion against the Provisional Government, and also implicitly against the looming alternative of peacefully replacing the government by a socialist *coalition* government based on the Soviets.

September's sudden veering from one extreme to another was very characteristic of Lenin, and became characteristic of the Soviet regime in power: the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, Khrushchev's 1956 de-Stalinization and Gorbachev's Perestroika are only the most striking examples. Of course, the sudden reversal was on the level of *tactics*. From April 1917 Lenin's strategy had been to fold together the “bourgeois” and “socialist” revolutions, far distant in Marxist philosophy of history, and to seize power by the Bolshevik party using the Soviets as its instrument. But this stubborn strategy was correlated in Lenin's case by ultra-flexible tactics deriving from Lenin's “operational code.”¹⁵³ Lenin went from success to success in 1917, and his successes on this devious path taught the other Bolsheviks to respect his operational code. As Trotsky put it, “Lenin's bold changes of policy...constitute an invaluable textbook of revolutionary strategy.”¹⁵⁴ Success, a state of the external environment, can teach patterns of behavior toward moderation and extremism and embed them in habits that long outlast the original successes. We see this today in Iran.

Contrast Lenin's varying tactics with those of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the first leader of al-Qa'eda in Iraq. The unpopularity of the American occupation among Sunnis gave Zarqawi a golden opportunity to create an-al-Qa'eda controlled territory in the heart of the Middle East, but Zarqawi squandered this opportunity by his stubborn, unvarying ferocity.

¹⁵² PSS, Vol. 49, 241-44.

¹⁵³ This is the important concept investigated by Nathan Leites, most impressing in the Study of Bolshevism, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953). Leites means by the operational code a set of assumptions that determined how Bolsheviks saw the world and how they achieved their aims – not the basic tenets of Marxism.

¹⁵⁴ RR I, 7th paragraph from the end, 591.

We could also compare the early Shi'ites, who took about a hundred years to evolve, in the hiding of the Imam, a doctrine, though a less flexible one, that allowed for phases of moderation. In fact, most great conquerors like Napoleon and Hitler have been defeated by lack of moderation. Lenin's oscillating tactics were, of course, not an Aladdin's lamp. His equivocal conduct during the July 1917 demonstrations, in the words of Sheila Fitzgerald, "...damaged Bolshevik morale and Lenin's credibility as a revolutionary leader."¹⁵⁵ But Lenin's flexible operational code was far superior to the equipment of Lenin's rivals: the rigid ideology of the Mensheviks, the unreasoning rage of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, and the obstinate defense of the old order by the White officer corps.

Causes of Lenin's turn to extremism

Why did Lenin shift so quickly and abruptly from one extreme of Bolshevik political debate to the other? The first line of the letter to the Central, Petrograd and Moscow Committees of the Party in which he announced his new turn argues that:

*Having received a majority in both capitals' Soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies, Bolsheviks can and ought to take state power in their hands.*¹⁵⁶

In the fuller argument of "Marxism and Insurrection," written September 13-14, Lenin gives as the first difference between September and the earlier period when many workers wanted seizure of power but Lenin did not call for it, as:

We still did not have a majority among the workers and soldiers. Now we have a majority in both [Petrograd and Moscow] Soviets.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3d edition paperback, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 58.

¹⁵⁶ "Bol'sheviki dolzhny vzyat vlast!," in www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works, accessed September 6, 2010, italics mine except "ought." This source in citing works of Lenin is henceforth abbreviated Marxists.org.

¹⁵⁷ V.I Lenin *Marxism I Vosstaniye, pis'mo tsentralnomu komitetu RSDRP, Sochineniya*, 4 Ed., Vol.26, (Moscow: Politizad, 1949) , 5

This suggests, as W. Bruce Lincoln argues,¹⁵⁸ that the primary cause of Lenin's reversal, although he gave other arguments, was the victories of Bolsheviks in achieving at least temporary majorities of their policies in the Soviets, not only in Petrograd (August 31-September 9) and Moscow (September 5), but in Kiev (September 8); one could add the Urals Congress of Soviets on August 18, the Finland Congress of Soviets on September 10, as well as the Moscow district Duma elections in August.¹⁵⁹ These results not only suggested that the majority of the working class and soldiers were turning to the Bolsheviks, they also--given the slogan "All power to the Soviets"—could give legitimacy to a Bolshevik seizure of power.

The Party reacts to Lenin

As Robert Service writes, "Most [Central Committee] members were appalled by what they read....[Lenin's] strategic somersaults were becoming insufferable. He was evidently out of touch with possibilities in Russia and ought to be ignored."¹⁶⁰ The Central Committee proceeded, by a vote of six to four with six abstentions, to order the burning of all but one copy of Lenin's letters. Instead it ordered comrades to "take measures that no demonstrations begin in the barracks and factories,"¹⁶¹ and his earlier, moderate positions were now reprinted in the Party press. The Bolshevik party was still very far from awed by the authority of its founder and leader.

The Party decides to seize power

On October 10 a clandestine meeting of the Central Committee met, with only twelve of twenty-one members present, to decide whether to seize power. Lenin harangued his

¹⁵⁸ W. Bruce Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914-18*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 427. See also "Pismo k tovarishcham," 17 October 1917, answer to the second statement "My nedostatochno sil'ny..." in *Sochineniya*, Vol. 26, 169,

¹⁵⁹ For these and other examples see Trotsky, *RR*, I, Chapter 34. These victories were, it is true, confined to some regions of the country.

¹⁶⁰ Service, *Lenin*, 301, 300.

¹⁶¹ *Protokoly*, 55. "Zayavleniye kameneva i zinov'eva, 13 (21) Oktyabra 1917 g.," *Protokoly tsentral'nogo komiteta RSDRP(b): Avgust 1917-Fevral' 1918*, (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958) 55. The "protokoly" are like the minutes of a Western meeting.

colleagues for an hour, reproving their “indifference to the question of an uprising.”¹⁶² He argued, in the skeletal summary of the notetaker, that “Up to this point, our upsurge goes by gigantic steps....Absenteeism and indifference of the masses can be explained by the fact that the masses are tired of words and resolutions....The political situation is thus ready. It is necessary to talk about the technical side...To wait for the Constituent Assembly, which obviously will not be with us, is pointless.” Discussion began with criticism, mostly not recorded, but in the end Lenin’s passion persuaded the members present to adopt this momentous resolution:

...an armed revolt is inescapable and fully mature, the CC offers to all the organizations of the Party to direct it, and from this point of view to consider and decide all the practical questions....”

The resolution was carried by 10 to 2, Kamenev and Zinoviev being the minority. The Bolshevik movement had adopted a much more extreme course at the urging of its most extreme leader. But the most practical question, the date of the uprising, was not decided. Anyone familiar with US Government meetings will recognize that Lenin’s proposal was not fully adopted: if you are too weak to resist a certain decision, you can accept it without a date of action in the hope that it can be reversed or be “overtaken by events.” In the next CC meeting, Kalinin said it might not happen for a year.

Even the decision that was taken evoked a passionate protest from the moderate leaders, Kamenev and Zinoviev, two of the Party’s most important chieftains, to major Bolshevik organizations.¹⁶³ This letter lays out the political program of moderate Bolshevism.¹⁶⁴ Kamenev and Zinoviev argue from a position of confidence, as a result of the “enormous growth of influence of the Party,” but argue that “the Russian working class is [not] able to consummate the current revolution by its own forces alone.” Luckily, “between

¹⁶² For this meeting see *Protokoly*, 83-86. The text in the fourth edition of Lenin’s *Sochineniya* is abridged.

¹⁶³ Reprinted in *Protokoly*, 87-92.

¹⁶⁴ “V zashchitu

us and the bourgeoisie stands an enormous third camp, the petty bourgeoisie,”¹⁶⁵ and the worsening of conditions will “force the [‘petty bourgeois parties,’ probably meaning the other socialist parties] to seek a union with the proletarian party [Bolsheviks] against the landlords and capitalists represented by the party of Kadets.” Therefore, “the chances of the Party in the Constituent Assembly elections are superb...by the right tactics we can get a third, or even more places in” it. A seizure of power, on the other hand, would push the petty bourgeoisie toward the bourgeois party for a long time.¹⁶⁶

The essence of Kamenev and Zinoviev’s positive argument can be summarized as follows. Don’t mess with success, things are going in our direction. We need and will get indispensable allies. Class-neutral democratic elections should be accepted and will work for us. But all this can only be harvested by tactics of incrementalism. It is a powerful argument ably presented. Responding to potential criticism, Kamenev and Zinoviev then intelligently add that “The mass of soldiers supports us not for a slogan of war [i.e. revolution, civil war] but for a slogan of peace.” As for the likelihood of revolution in Western Europe, argued by Lenin, they say prophetically that there are good signs, but “from hence to any active support for proletarian revolution in Russia ...is still very far. To overestimate one’s forces is extremely harmful.”¹⁶⁷

Then Kamenev and Zinoviev turn to the crucial question of a revolt’s chances. They agree with Lenin that Petrograd will decide, but say that the enemy has, like the Bolsheviks, “significant [military] forces” there.

So the decisive question consists in this, is there really among the workers and soldiers of the capital such a mood, that they themselves already see salvation only in street battle, in eagerness to go into the streets. No. This mood does not exist.

¹⁶⁵ A Marxist term originally designating small-scale merchants, shopkeepers, artisans who employed labor, clerks and other low-ranking government employees such as many postal and telegraph workers, but used more and more vaguely and, soon, abusively.

¹⁶⁶ *Protokoly*, 87-88.

¹⁶⁷ *Protokoly*, 88-89.

This pessimistic assessment of supporters' mood is supported by the reports from local agitators after the decision to seize power was taken. So this section of the argument can be summed up "we do not have the right to stake the whole future on the card of armed revolt."¹⁶⁸ In all this reasoning, Kamenev and Zinoviev display the orientation of people who are good at proposing compromises and uniting different points of view, traits of character lacking in Lenin.

As Lenin and the moderates argued, not only the revolution but perhaps also millions of lives exacted by Lenin and Stalin hung in the balance. Kamenev and Zinoviev ultimately lost, though the fundamental argument between these two approaches to Bolshevik success remained open at least another two months. Kamenev and Zinoviev turned out to be wrong about the military balance, not because the Bolsheviks were strong but because the morale of the forces on the other side evaporated. They may have been wrong as well about the Constituent Assembly, where the Bolsheviks got only a quarter of the votes after the seizure of power and under its influence, which surely changed their poll results.

The limits of moderation

We should be clear about the limits of moderation among the less extreme Bolsheviks. Moderation was moderation within the socialist "camp," not moderation toward "hostile classes" or other outside forces, such as the "imperialist" warring powers. In the very letter where they protest against the decision to seize power, Kamenev and Zinoviev say "through the army, through the workers we hold a revolver to the temple of the bourgeoisie...."¹⁶⁹ Within the socialist "camp," in contrast, the Bolshevik leadership trusted SR commanders who later betrayed them, and gave SR leaders found by their courts to be involved in the July 1918 rebellion and attempted assassination of Lenin suspended sentences. The limits of Bolshevik moderation were set in 1917-20 by ideology or doctrine, as is the unwillingness of Iran to cooperate with the US, as opposed to Sunni Hamas, is today. Recognition of the limits to extremist movements' episodes of moderation is

¹⁶⁸ *Protokoly*, 90-91.

¹⁶⁹ "Zayavleniye kameneva i zinov'eva, 13 (21) Oktyabra 1917 g.," *Protokoly tsentral'nogo komiteta RSDRP(b): Avgust 1917-Fevral' 1918*, (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958), 87.

important for American policy, because the US often tries to cooperate with movements such as Taliban without trying to ascertain where the limits of such moderation might be.

October 16 meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee

Clearly the October 10-11 CC decision had not ended, but aroused, passionate debate between moderates and extremists within the Party. To settle it, another, “augmented” meeting, with representatives of lower Party committees and Bolshevik representatives from the labor unions and factory committees was convened on October 16.

Lenin read the October 10 resolution and expounded the motives behind it again. As far as one can judge from the notetaker’s summary, he ignored the argument of Kamenev and Zinoviev to build on the existing success and their hopes for movement of the petty bourgeoisie and its parties into the Bolshevik camp. He said a compromise — his early September position — had been offered to the Mensheviks and SRs, and refused. He continued “the masses are going for us,” citing the election evidence. So, “the position is clear: either a Kornilovite [military] dictatorship, or the dictatorship of the Proletariat and the poorest strata of the peasantry”— ignoring the alternative most popular at the time, a broad socialist coalition of the parties appealing to various social groups, perhaps on the grounds that the other socialists had refused it. This black - or white alternative is typically of Lenin’s dichotomous thinking, the sign of a mind that is extremist even in organizing information and posing alternatives. As for the current popular mood,

The mood of the masses we can’t be directed by, because it is changeable and incalculable [*ne poddaetsya uchetu*]; we ought to be directed by objective analysis and assessment of the revolution.¹⁷⁰

Here Lenin betrays that he responds not to the empirical working classes, but to an objective Working Class that existed in his imagination. He went on to predict vague support from revolutionary socialists in Europe, arguing with Kamenev and Zinoviev’s pessimism, and to

¹⁷⁰ *Protokoly*, 94.

make the paranoid argument that the bourgeoisie was about to give up Petrograd, “from this we can save it, only by taking Petrograd into our hands.”

Lenin was followed by reports on readiness to rebel from the Petrograd neighborhoods, many of which were surprisingly damp. In Vasil’evskiy Island, site of the University, and Vyborg region, a Bolshevik stronghold, “there is no mood for battle.” In Moskovskiy region, “The mood is reckless, they will go out at the call of the Soviet, but not the Party.” In Narva region, “There is no aspiration to rise...;” in Neva, “For the Soviets everybody will go out;” in Okhta, “The business is bad,” while in Rozhdestvenskiy region “There is also doubt they will rise; strengthening of the influence of the anarchists,” reported also in several other places and among unionized workers. Shlyapnikov, reporting on the metal-workers’ union, transmitted that: “...A Bolshevik rising is not popular; rumors about it even provoke panic.”¹⁷¹ Such reports supply an invaluable context to the Party leaders’ indecision about whether to seize power; the willingness of workers and soldiers to follow these men into the streets was only one of many, many unknowns.

A debate on a new resolution followed.¹⁷² The first two speakers opposed seizing power. The discussion centered on the question of success, not desirability, showing that Lenin had gained ground since the tenth. Milyutin “maintained that we are not ready to strike the first blow. To overthrow, arrest [the government] in the next days we don’t have the power.” Lenin answered back that “it was not a matter of armed forces,...it was...one part of the army fighting against another,” betraying justified reservations about the combat efficiency of armed workers. Stalin gave him powerful support, arguing that

What Kamenev and Zinoviev maintain, objectively gives the possibility to organize the counterrevolution; we will retreat without end and lose the whole revolution....

¹⁷¹ *Protokoly*, 95-97; compare Volodarskiy in the debate proper, 100.

¹⁷² *Protokoly*, 97-104.

Finally, Zinoviev and Kamenev again made the case against seizing power. Zinoviev's most powerful point was that "It is inadmissible to put oneself in a position of complete isolation." Kamenev spoke more decisively and impatiently:

Since the adoption of the resolution a week has passed...for this week nothing was done....The result of the week speaks for the [conclusion,] that the givens for a revolt now do not exist.

He addressed Lenin's sense of urgency by arguing that "The question does not stand thus: either now, or never." Finally, he expressed in the broadest frame the fundamental divergence between his strategy and Lenin's:

"Here two tactics are struggling with one another: the tactic of conspiracy [a suspect tactic in Marxism] and the tactic of faith in the moving forces of Russian revolution."¹⁷³

Some of the invited guests from other party bodies seconded Kamenev's arguments. A certain Fenigshteyn stated baldly,

It was shown earlier that the armed uprising was not prepared by us technically. We are walking half-consciously into a defeat.

But Sokolnikov specifically disagreed with Kamenev and the speakers who pointed out their military unpreparedness, recalling "the events of February [Revolution], when nothing was prepared; then, however the revolution was victorious."¹⁷⁴ As the discussion petered out, Kamenev made a move on the chessboard, proposing a compromise resolution "that it be printed in the central [Party press] organs that we will not call for an uprising until the Congress [of Soviets]," expected in three days. Zinoviev offered a resolution not to rebel without the assent of the Bolshevik members of the Soviet.

¹⁷³ *Protokoly*, 99-100.

¹⁷⁴ *Protokoly*, 100-102.

Lenin's resolution was:

The meeting fully welcomes and fully supports the resolution of the Central Committee and calls upon all organisations and on workers and soldiers to make all-round, energetic preparations for an armed uprising and to support the centre set up for that purpose by the Central Committee; the meeting expresses its complete confidence that the Central Committee and the Soviet will indicate in good time the favourable moment and the most appropriate methods of attack.¹⁷⁵

So Lenin still felt that he could not get enough support for a specific date of revolt. Another momentous vote took place, and his resolution won:

For: 20

Against: 2

Abstaining 4

Many of the non-voting guests introduced amendments to weaken it, all defeated.

Why did Lenin win once again, in the face of the dissension in the party and the spotty mood of their supporters? Historians usually do not answer this question. It had been a long time since February, and many revolutionaries were tired and impatient; they did not look forward to an even longer and more draining campaign. Some CC members may have been eager to hold office or eager to show what they could do there. There may also have been some awareness, although it goes unmentioned, of a phenomenon frequent in revolutions, the retreat of the "masses" from revolutionary politics after some chaotic and unsuccessful months of revolution. The lukewarmness of many workers and soldiers about the uprising may be evidence of this. The Bolsheviks faced some risk of losing the moment and facing a strengthened counterrevolutionary reaction, another stage in revolutions, without holding power. The soldiers were less tepid, and for the CC members as well the war had made violence an ordinary means of getting things done. The deteriorating situation in the country suggested the need to do something very soon. The Provisional Government was fading away like the Cheshire Cat and had soon to be replaced by something. Lenin's authority as first

¹⁷⁵ Resolutions and amendments: *Protokoly*, 103-104.

among Party equals, and his volcanic passion, must have counted for much in the meeting itself. All this took place in an angry age of Russian history. The Bolshevik Party attracted the angriest revolutionaries at a particularly angry moment, and the anger of Lenin appealed to them intensely. Finally, these were revolutionaries, and the image of traditional revolution with its noise and blood was ever-beckoning. An intelligent Central Committee member, Sokolnikov, had powerfully foretold the frustrations along Kamenev's moderate path:

“If the Congress adopts all power to the Soviets [i.e, declares itself to be the government], then it is necessary to pose the question, what to do, to call out the masses or not.”¹⁷⁶

In other words, a “velvet” revolution by which the Congress of Soviets declared it was taking power for its Executive, and the Provisional Government meekly conceded it -- a likely outcome -- would seem to make useless the revolutionary energy of the people, the essence of revolution.

Lenin's case for extremism

This CC vote as well did not end the passionate arguments within the Party, as Lenin foresaw when he angrily dashed off a detailed answer to Kamenev and Zinoviev the next day. This text¹⁷⁷ states the case for extremism in an extreme manner, just as Zinoviev and Kamenev's letter moderately argues the case for relatively moderate behavior.

At the beginning, the Lenin's “Letter to Comrades” seems so different from Kamenev's and Zinoviev's. Lenin's letter is obviously the work of a man in a rage. He assaults Kamenev and Zinoviev, as well as the reader, with personal abuse (“either distorters of the truth or pedants,” “heroes of ‘constitutional illusions’ and parliamentary cretinism, ‘people frightened by the bourgeoisie,’ ‘philistine,’ ‘shameful vacillations,’ ‘sad pessimists,’ ‘chatterers’”), sneering irony and evident exaggeration. Lenin opens each argument with a passage in quotes, as though citing his targets, but these are paraphrases, often parodies of their real

¹⁷⁶ *Protokoly*, 102 top.

¹⁷⁷ Lenin, “Pis'mo k tovarishcham,” *Sochineniya*, 4 Edition, Vol. 26, 166-184. This work is, confusingly, written so as to conceal the fact that Lenin was present at the 16 October meeting.

words. He paints with a housepainter's brush: the proof that the Bolsheviks are supported by "the majority of the people" is election results in which they received 33 to 49.3 percent. Lenin's logic is bad. He never responds substantively to quoted arguments that "we are not strong enough to seize power," the greatest worry of the cautious Bolsheviks at the October 16 meeting, or that "the soldiers may not be willing to fight a revolutionary war," displaying a characteristic lack of confidence in coping with professional military issues. Making zealous conviction the standard for purely factual questions, he flings this accusation:

No, to doubt now that the majority of the people are following and will follow the Bolsheviks means to shamefully vacillate, and in practice is to throw out *all* the principles of proletarian evolutionism, to repudiate Bolshevism completely.¹⁷⁸

For Lenin, as for Shakespeare's Cleopatra, an unwelcome message must be *willed* by the messenger.

Lenin's mode of argument is so unfair that it comes as a shock to realize that he actually treats most of the arguments made by Kamenev and Zinoviev in their letter. Replying to the most important argument, don't mess with success, Lenin taunts:

This is the argument of a philistine¹⁷⁹ who has "read" that the Constitutional Assembly is being called, and who trustingly acquiesces in the most legal, most loyal, most constitutional course....The living life disappears, and what remains is only a *paper* about the convocation of the Constitutional Assembly; there remains only-- to hold elections.¹⁸⁰

Lenin mocks calmness, legality, loyalty, constitutionalism, the first class-neutral vote and elections in general while evading Kamenev and Zinoviev's basic point. His real response emerges from an effective piece of rhetoric answering the fear that ... " 'everyone' is against us! We are isolated....:"

¹⁷⁸ *Sochininiya*, 26:169.

¹⁷⁹ Term of literary criticism that passed into the abuse lexicon of the Russian left: a vulgar, self-satisfied person.

¹⁸⁰ *Sochineniya*, 26: 172.

Up to now we have been mercilessly scourging the vacillators for their vacillations. *By so doing*, we have won the sympathy of the people. *By so doing*, we conquered the Soviets, without which the uprising could not be firm, quick, and sure. Now let us use the Soviets which we conquered in order *to move into the encampment of the vacillators*. What a splendid career for Bolshevism!¹⁸¹

Kamenev never attained this rhetorical power. Lenin has a point: the Bolshevik success Kamenev and Zinoviev point to was hardly gained by moderation. But Lenin interprets success different than the two moderates. For Kamenev and Zinoviev, the success gained by extremist policies can best be exploited by agreement with rivals (excluding the bourgeoisie) that will give you a dominant role in a socialist coalition. For Lenin, success through extremism is an argument for greater extremism, culminating in rivals' political annihilation.

Pushing impatiently through practical questions about how the Bolsheviks will rule, Lenin rushes to identify the guilty. His Kamenev and Zinoviev raise the problem;

"There is only enough bread in Petrograd for two or three days. Can we give bread to the insurgents?"

Lenin replies:

One of thousands of sceptical remarks ..., one of those remarks that put the blame on the wrong shoulders. It is really Rodzyanko and Co., it is really the bourgeoisie that are preparing the famine and speculating¹⁸² on strangling the revolution by famine. There is no salvation from the famine and *there can be none* except by an uprising....¹⁸³

Faced with a practical difficulty of seizing power — one that reduced the victorious Bolsheviks to desperation in 1918-19--Lenin's reaction is that *someone is guilty... and must be destroyed*.

At every level Lenin's argument expresses, praises, and encourages extremism. It breeds, even more than Kamenev and Zinoviev's, wild suspicions and suspicious interpretations of apparently contrary phenomena.

Indeed, is there *anybody in his senses* who can doubt that the Rodzyankos and Suvorins [apparently opposed leaders of the Russian Right] are acting in concert, *that the roles have*

¹⁸¹ *Sochineniya*, 26:175.

¹⁸² In Russian, to speculate on something is to manipulate it to one's own advantage, still a favorite locution.

¹⁸³ *Sochineniya*, 26: 177.

*been distributed among them? Has it not been proved by facts that Kerensky acts on Rodzyanko's orders....*¹⁸⁴

In other words, their apparent disagreement only feeds the fantasy that they are secretly working together. Similarly, Lenin suspects that the super-patriot Rodzyanko is working with the German Kaiser, and the British as well, in spite of the lethal war the latter two were waging against each other. A typical trope, here as in all Lenin's writings, is to present only extreme courses of action and push the audience to choose between them.

Either go over to the side of the Lieberdans¹⁸⁵ [moderate socialists] and *openly* renounce the slogan "All Power to the Soviets", or start the uprising....There is no middle course.

Why? Kamenev and Zinoviev propose such a course. Lenin's mind craves bipolar simplicity: black and white, good and evil, total helplessness and total power.

Especially portentous is Lenin's treatment of apparently unified social groups, such as the peasantry. Responding to Kamenev and Zinoviev's complaint about lack of Bolshevik influence over the railwaymen's and postal and telegraph workers' unions, Lenin says:

The political and economic life of the unions of postal and telegraph employees and railwaymen is characterized by the [very] *separation* of the proletarian elements of the mass from the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois upper layer.¹⁸⁶

A Marxist could quarrel with this: class is determined by relationship to the means of production, and the workers in question all receive a wage for labor on equipment that belongs to the bourgeoisie in the normal sense (or its state), who take the fruit of the workers' labor for their own. But just as in the case of his first book, on the peasantry, Lenin feels a need to find in social groups the unjust order of the whole society reduplicated in miniature, from the bourgeoisie to the real toilers.¹⁸⁷ In a practical sense, he looks at apparent friends and finds many enemies.

Does not Lenin do this throughout his essay, and throughout his revolutionary activity? Put yourself in the position of Kamenev and Zinoviev looking back to the February Revolution. In February there existed an immense consensus for drastic social change in

¹⁸⁴ *Sochineniya* 26: 180, italics mine.

¹⁸⁵ Derisive nickname for moderate socialists, combining the names of the Menshevik leaders Mikhail Lieber and Fyodor Dan, coined by the poet Demyan Bedniy in an August 1917 article.

¹⁸⁶ *Sochineniya* 26: 176.

¹⁸⁷ This need should be remembered, because it will reappear again and again in Soviet history in different forms.

Russia, ranging from the bulk of the court nobility and “big” bourgeoisie to the poorest peasant. That consensus was a huge resource for revolutionary change. Lenin, looking at that immense body of opinion, saw that almost everyone was insufficiently radical—that the socialists were “vacillators,” the Kulaks and the “middle peasants” exploiters, the railway workers riddled with bourgeois and petty-bourgeois elements. Now he looks at the Bolsheviks themselves, and finds that Zinoviev and Kamenev, two of the Party’s most senior leaders, have “repudiated Bolshevism.” They are, as he soon will say, really enemies. Lenin’s political career has been buying enemies. Now he looks around him and finds that he is ringed by enemies.

Preparations for seizing power

Ringed by enemies, Lenin will end in a defiant boxer’s crouch; but they are the enemies that he himself defined, and in that sense, created. We can see here one of the mechanisms by which extremism becomes more and more extreme. And is it wrong to see here in Lenin the nightmare Stalin years, with the people, aware of the need for *bditelnost’*, vigilance, anxiously scanning the faces of their doctors for “murderers in white coats”? In any case, Kamenev replies to rumors printed in the socialist press, and contributes a dignified letter repeating in general terms his opposition to any seizure of power. Lenin, who has never been on strike in his life, shrilly accuses Kamenev and Zinoviev of “strikebreaking,” and demands their expulsion from the party.

While all this goes on, the Military Revolutionary Committee, a body recently authorized by the Petrograd Soviet, is visiting garrison units to win their participation in the seizure of power. What is won, almost always, is their neutrality. As Trotsky puts it, “Thus that completely demoralized garrison was to rally once more in the October Days, and rattle its weapons suggestively, before completely going to pieces.”¹⁸⁸ The Red Guard is more committed, but lacks training and weapons; they are generally armed with rifles, which no longer inflict most of the casualties in war. Trotsky sums it up, “The numerous garrisons lacked the will to fight. The sailor detachments lacked numbers. The Red Guard lacked skill.” So half the military balance is as Kamenev suggested; the Bolsheviks have little force on their side. But the Provisional Government has no one at all.

¹⁸⁸ Trotsky, *Russian Revolution*, 752.

They will carry out routine orders, when Kerensky begins to react on the 24 they close the door of Bolshevik papers. But no one believes in the government they serve. The authority of the Cabinet, without Kerensky who has fled, is confined to the Winter Palace, a vast indefensible monument .

Lenin urges the seizure of power with growing desperation, as can be seen in Lenin's letter to members of the Central Committee.

Comrades,

I am writing these lines on the evening of the 24th. The situation is critical in the extreme. In fact it is now absolutely clear that to delay the uprising would be fatal.

With all my might I urge comrades to realize that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by *peoples, by the masses*, by the struggle of the armed people...

We must at all costs, this very evening, this very night, arrest the government, having first disarmed the officer cadets (defeating them, if they resist), and so on.

We must not wait! We may lose everything!..

...under no circumstances should power be left in the hands of Kerensky and Co. until the 25th; not under any circumstances; the matter must be *decided without fail this very evening, or this very night*.

History will not forgive revolutionaries for procrastinating when they could be victorious today (and they certainly will be victorious today), while they risk losing much tomorrow, in fact, they risk losing everything.

It would be a disaster, or a sheer formality, to await the wavering [Congress of Soviets] vote of October 25. The people have the right and are *in duty bound to decide* such questions not by a vote, *but by force*; in critical moments of revolution, *the people have the right and are in duty bound to give directions to their representatives, even their best representatives, and not to wait for them*.

The government is tottering. It must be *given the death blow* at all costs.

To delay action is fatal.¹⁸⁹

Why a Violent, Less Legitimate Revolution?

Orlando Figes has rightly raised the question,

Why was Lenin so insistent on the need for an armed uprising *before* the Congress of Soviets? All the signs were that time was on the side of the Bolsheviks: the country was falling apart; the Soviets were moving to the left; and the forthcoming Congress would almost certainly endorse the Bolshevik call for a transfer of power to the Soviets. Why stage a premature uprising and run the risk of civil war and defeat?¹⁹⁰

October, an imitation of revolution?

The Soviet image of October is best captured by Eisenstein's movie *October*, with its armed workers swarming against the Winter Palace, seat of the Provisional Government, shooting and shelling. It still floats today in the preserved cruiser *Avrora*, which famously fired the first shot of the attack. But in reality the *Avrora* fired blanks. In fact, as Lenin once admitted and contemporary historians emphasize, the Party "found power lying in the streets and simply picked it up." Contemporary historians rightly emphasize that the October Revolution was more an evaporation of the vestiges of authority and power still held by the Provisional Government than any "seizure of power" by the Bolshevik Party. But one wonders whether this realization does justice to the real strangeness of what happened.

Perhaps we should consider October not as a revolution, but as an *imitation* of a revolution. It resembled a real revolution in the way that a military parade imitates an offensive. Both are organized advances by troops, but what is missing in a parade is the other side — and it was missing in October too. As Trotsky himself records, "The fourth [provisional] government, arising after the longest crisis of all, was incapable of doing anything. Hardly born, it began to die and sat waiting with wide-open eyes for the undertaker."¹⁹¹ As for the moderate socialists, "The Compromisers [moderate socialists]

¹⁸⁹ Lenin's *Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, (Moscow, Volume 26, 1972), 234-235, URL: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/24.htm>, on 27 Dec, 2010

¹⁹⁰ Figes, *Tragedy*, 470.

¹⁹¹ Trotsky, *Russian Revolution*, very end of volume 2, 613.

learned from day to day with amazement and horror that they no longer possessed any power of resistance.”¹⁹² It was certain that the Provisional Government could not last long, and the only open question was what would replace it; for the near future the Bolsheviks were in the best position to do so. Some episodes often remembered as revolutions have this character: the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, the French revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Turkish revolution of 1908, the German and Austrian revolutions of 1918, and the collapse of the Eastern European and Soviet Communist regimes. Historians insist Lenin was obsessed with gaining power, and he could have easily gained it this way. But such a revolution was not what Lenin wanted. Perhaps his craving for more was derived from the reputation of revolution. Every revolutionary associated revolution with its most exciting episodes such as the taking of the Bastille. These episodes were celebrated, distilled, embroidered, and reinvented in songs like the *Marseillaise*, in paintings like Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. Lenin wanted a revolution of this kind, a revolution that would be an upsurge of popular enthusiasm that dispatched the old order by violence. Does it go too far to say he wanted to enact his fantasy of revolution? Certainly, as Martin Malia argued, “October set the precedent for the continuing use of coercion by the Party throughout all the stages of its construction of socialism.”¹⁹³ But even coercion was not everything Lenin wanted. He wanted a destructive and renewing upsurge of popular vitality. If this is right, the reader should be prepared for other expressions of this craving in Soviet history, sometimes very surprising ones.

October as a military operation

The operation to overthrow the Provisional Government started well enough. The part of it that decided to come out for the Bolsheviks, together with larger numbers of Red Guard soldiers, moved well enough to their initial positions, intended to isolate and immobilize the Government. These points had been intelligently selected. In a city divided by canals, there were prolonged arguments—not battles!—between Red Guards and Garrison units about whether to raise the bridges. Most of them are raised, and the Winter Palace is isolated. The

¹⁹² Trotsky, *Russian Revolution*, Ch 34, near the beginning, just after the break, 567.

¹⁹³ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 93. Malia’s book is perhaps the most thought-provoking history of the Soviet Union.

Red forces are supplied with food. But then the operation begins to go wrong, and ends in hopeless disarray. The signal to begin is raising a red lantern, and none can be found. The cruiser *Avrora* is to shell the Palace, but fires only blanks. And the forces move twenty-four hours late. If anyone was for the other side, it would have been a mess. This is a foretaste of the Civil War.

Thinking and speaking in clichés

No one will fight for the provisional government, and they are arrested. The Congress of Soviets has begun, and the seizure of power is announced. The Mensheviks and SRs protest, and walk out. Trotsky, in his hour of glory, orates:

To those who have gone out of here and to those who have put up proposals [for compromise] we have to say: you are pathetic individuals, you are bankrupts, your role is played out: go off to where you belong from now on, into the waste basket [*korzina*] of history!¹⁹⁴

You cannot throw people in a wastebasket.¹⁹⁵ Trotsky is here ranting in clichés, a feature of Soviet political rhetoric made famous by George Orwell. Examples of such clichés are the word “lackey” or the connection of top hats, worn after 1918 only at weddings and Presidential inaugurations, to capitalists in every Soviet cartoon and poster up to 1991. Orwell’s wonderfully perceptive analysis has caused such clichés, to connect in our minds with Stalinism. But this feature of Russian revolutionary rhetoric was present from the beginning of the organized movement; it only became more extreme over time. In Trotsky’s famous speech, another such cliché is to call the moderates “bankrupts,” a real reproach coming from a bourgeois who prioritized orderly financial management, but not from a revolutionary.

¹⁹⁴ N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revolutsii*, (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), vol. 3, book 7, 337.

¹⁹⁵ I owe this point to Vera Gogokhia.

What is the effect of thinking in clichés on extremism and moderation? First, it promotes automatic responses to the words, reducing self-awareness and deliberation. Second, it perpetuates the early momentum of extremist movements. If you are Imam Khomeini, to call the Shah by the Qur’anic label “Pharoah” permits you to react to the arrival of kingship in Islam, which happened around the year 800, as though it had never occurred; you do not adapt to it or ask whether Islam may somehow need it. Third, such language therefore insulates movements from the passing events that our policy debate usually thinks must sway them. In all these respects, the habit of speaking, writing and thinking in clichés tends to make movements more extreme.

The cost is a growing estrangement from real experience that makes a movement seem old and false because its terms are old and no longer evoke experience. One result is loss of support from perceptive people or those who simply want to live in a contemporary way. By 1987 all the talk and images of capitalists, their lackeys and shiny top hats, or of Nazi “revanchists,” was felt by Gorbachev and his aides to be increasingly thin and false. So such clichéd language generates impulses to renewal. Its effect is first to retain extremist roots in a conservative way, then to disrupt the existing order to re-discover a movement’s authenticity. It is one of many features that make extremist movements changeable.

After the 1917 October Revolution: moderation lives

In retrospect, the October Revolution seems like a door opening on a new reality. But it did not seem so at the time. The conventional wisdom had become that the Bolsheviks would seize power, but not be able to hold it. There was tremendous ambiguity in the situation that held much justification for this view. Many members of the Congress of Soviets, expecting power to go to the Soviets, meaning a coalition Socialist government, were angry to suddenly find the Bolsheviks holding it. On October 26, the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries refused to join a governmental coalition with the Bolsheviks, weakening its chances of viability. A one-party government was formed. Lenin was appointed as a chairman of the Council of the Peoples Commissars (Sovnarkom); Trotsky appointed a Peoples Commissar for External Affairs ; Stalin – Peoples Commissar for Nationalities Affairs. The export of the revolution

had just begun, and bloody street fighting was going on in Moscow; so far it looked like socialism in one city. Most serious, government bureaucrats went on strike, and the railway union, Vikzhel, went on strike, vowing to continue until negotiations for a coalition government began. These strikes could paralyze the country and starve out Petrograd. Lenin also faced much opposition inside his own party. Lenin demanded announcement of the postponement of the Constituent Assembly elections, but was rebuffed by Sverdlov. The difficulties the Bolsheviks were having in establishing their rule made Kamenev and Zinoviev powerful again, because they could negotiate with the other socialist parties.

Accordingly, on October 27, 1917 Kamenev was authorized to lead negotiations with the Railway Union, as well as with Mensheviks and SRs. The next day negotiations on coalition government began. On October 31, 1917 the Bolshevik Central Committee voted to support a socialist coalition. In the plan under discussion, the SRs agreed to accept the Bolsheviks in a government, and the Bolsheviks agreed in return to leave Lenin and Trotsky out of it. On November 1 Kamenev and Lenin had a crucial argument at the Central Committee; as a result of it the CC voted for negotiations only on the condition that the Bolshevik policy agenda was accepted beforehand, which would scuttle the negotiations. The day after, the Central Committee adopted a no compromise policy regarding Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries. The Central Committee was reversing itself every day, a sign of bewilderment at the confused situation in the country and at the opposite courses urged by its respected leaders. Its leaders were fighting over whether to steer a moderate or extreme course.

On November 3, 1917 Lenin maneuvered decisions so as to send Stalin to the meetings with the Railway Workers' Union, instead of Kamenev. Stalin disrupted the agreement, as he was ordered to do. As a result, the next day, on November 4, Kamenev and some other colleagues resigned from the Bolshevik Central Committee; some of the Peoples Commissars resigned as well. On November 10, An Extraordinary Congress of Peasants was held, at which Left SRs supported the idea of the Railway Worker's Union for merged Soviets of peasant, worker, and soldier. Finally, the Bolsheviks, pressured by the resignations in their ranks, agreed with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries to become partners in a

Sovnarkom coalition (December 8, 1917). The Left SRs gained some ministries important to them, and some sources of power in a conflict: Agriculture, Justice, Posts and Telegraphs. But the coalition was being established under more unequal conditions than would have prevailed in October or early November. The Bolsheviks had endured in power for six weeks, contrary to the predictions of many. It began to look as though they might be able to hold on.

During December-January and February Red Army was very successful in pushing the White Volunteer Army from the towns of the Cossack south and pressing it into the empty, arid steppes. Lenin had, precariously, prevailed over the Bolsheviks, and they had prevailed over the armed opposition. But a dark cloud filled the whole horizon: the Imperial German Army. The Germans and their junior partners Austria-Hungary had forced on the Russian Army the defeats that shattered the Tsar's regime. The informal dictators of Germany, Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff, were brutal conservatives whose aversion to any independent power in Europe, and to revolutionary socialists in particular, was obvious. Could Lenin's new government, frailer than the Tsar's, somehow withstand the overwhelming force in the center of Europe?¹⁹⁶

The debate on peace with Germany

For Bolsheviks, of course, Germany, its army and its dictators must be seen through the lens of class struggle, which is the deepest reality in all of history. Behind Imperial Germany stood the dominating part of the international bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie of the whole world, with all its might, with enormous energy, intellect and determination, stopping at no crime . . . is preparing to suppress the proletariat in the impending [international] civil war.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ The account of this period is based on R. Service, *Lenin*, (London: Pan Books, 2000), 308-323.; and Geoffrey Swain, *Russia's Civil War*, (Stroud, The History Press, 2008), 22-26. Swain's book is very useful for grasping the conflicting impulses to extremism and moderation during this period, but at the cost of somewhat overstating the influence and potential of the peasant-SR "Greens" or "third force."

¹⁹⁷ Lenin, "The Tasks of the Third International," 1919, quoted in Leites, *A study of Bolshevism*, 405.

The danger is not of ordinary defeat, but of *unichtozhenie*, a favorite Bolshevik word, of *annihilation*. In an earlier intra-socialist conflict, apparently much less momentous, waged without cannon, Lenin said:

Nowhere in western Europe is the question raised which is raised among us: The question of the *existence* of the Party itself, of the *being* of the Party. That is not a difference of opinion about how the Party should be structured, . . . but a difference about the question of the *being* of the Party.¹⁹⁸

But now, with Russia routed, cringing, disordered and starving, there can be no peace without being bled. The German-Austrian host occupies Poland, Lithuania, Latvia including Riga, White Russia and part of Russian Ukraine. Germany's terms include giving up all these areas. So to the fresh young worker's state, newly triumphant at home, any peace will be humiliating and discrediting.

On 8 (21) January 1918 in Petrograd the members of the Party Central Committee met with the communist delegates of III Congress of Soviets. Lenin spoke at the meeting and read his famous "Theses on the immediate conclusion of a separate and annexationist Peace" advocating signing a disadvantageous peace with Germany. Against Lenin's theses came out Trotsky, Kamenev, Preobrazhensky, Lomov, Osinsky, and Yakovleva.¹⁹⁹ Discussion of the theses revealed three opinions in the party on conclusion of peace: Lenin's view of the necessity to accept the German peace terms (15 votes), the "Left Communist" proposal of the announcement of "revolutionary war" against Germany (32 votes) and Trotsky's position - "neither war nor peace," meaning ceasing combat without signing (16 votes).

¹⁹⁸ Speech in the Central Committee, 1914, quoted in Leites, *A study of Bolshevism*, 400-401.

¹⁹⁹ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, March 1918, Stenograficheski Otchyot' (Moscow, Gospolitizdat, 1962), 216-218

On 11 (24) January 1918 the issue of peace treaty with German was discussed at the Party Central Committee meeting where a report on the peace negotiations was made by Lenin.²⁰⁰ As a result of the discussion on the proposal for the conduct of peace the idea of the revolutionary war collected only 2 votes; against it voted 11 people. "The Left Bolsheviks" after this failure turned to Trotsky's position, and consequently, Trotsky's proposal, "neither war nor peace," was at this meeting in a majority (at - 9, vs. - 7). Lenin had nothing left but to insist on the acceptance of Trotsky's proposal to delay peace negotiations as long as possible. The Germans were unwilling to play this game for long; in February they advanced all along the front and the Russian troops melted away in front of them. The Bolsheviks panicked, leading to the founding of the Red Army.

On 10-18 (23-31) January 1918 in Petrograd was held the Third Congress of Soviets. It was attended by 1,046 delegates, from which 942 had a decisive vote. The report did not specify party composition of Congress, but According to indirect data, the vast majority belonged to the Communists and the Left SRs, with a predominance of Communists; other parties had a total of not more than 100 seats. The principal questions in the agenda of the Congress were: 1) the organization of Soviet power, 2) a report of the delegation on peace negotiations, and 3) the fundamental law of the land.²⁰¹

The anti-treaty "Left Communists," led by Bukharin and Pyatakov, approached the Central Committee of the Party to demand the immediate convocation of a party Conference for a final decision on war and peace. Similar statements were sent to the Central Committee by the "Left Communists" who constituted the majority of the executive committee of the Petersburg Committee by a group of senior officials of the Urals party organization (Preobrazhensky, Krestinsky, Beloborodov, et al.)²⁰² The "Lefts" were favorable to a Conference, since it would have represented regional and provincial party committees, the majority of whom supported them.

²⁰⁰ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 241-246

²⁰¹ Note #42 from L. Trotsky's "*Sachinenie*", Vol. 17, Part 1, 1926

²⁰² *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 281-282, 319-320

Under the pressure of the swift German advance, Lenin's government agrees to their terms, which are now much harsher. Russia must renounce claims on Ukraine and all the territory of the Baltic States. Everyone assumes that the newly independent territories will become German satellites, and they do. On March 3 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is signed between Russia and the Central Powers, ending World War I in the East. Russia concedes a massive amount of land, people and resources: the Baltic States, Belarus, and Ukraine. It still needs to be ratified, however. The Seventh Extraordinary Congress of the RCP (b), convened primarily to address the issue of peace, was the first party congress after the October Revolution. It took place in Petrograd on 6-8 March of 1918. The Party at the time of the Congress had about 300 000 members. In the same Congress was attended by 47 delegates from voting and 59 in an advisory capacity, representing about 170,000 party members.²⁰³ The Party organizations in the area facing the Germans support Lenin, but many inland Party committees support the Left Communists. Clearly, the country is more patriotic than Bolshevik rhetoric against Tsar and Provisional Government assumed.

On the second day of the Party congress, March 7, at the morning meeting Lenin gave the Political Report of the Central Committee on the question of war and peace. Lenin said that any abstract truth, if you're using it without any analysis, turns into a phrase. It is completely useless to transfer the old method of struggle against Kerensky and Kornilov and triumphant march to the new historical period, where the danger is German imperialism.²⁰⁴ In other words, Lenin accuses his comrades of euphoria from the triumph of October.

This is a sick part of the Russian state body, which can not endure any longer the hardships of this war. The sooner we demobilize it, the sooner it dissolves among the parts that are not yet so sick, the sooner the country will be ready for new tests...²⁰⁵

“History tells us that the peace is a respite from war, ... I repeat that I am ready to sign and will assume the responsibility to sign a treaty twenty times, a hundred times more humiliating treaty, to get at least a few days”.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 301, 334-335, 343, 344

²⁰⁴ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 14

²⁰⁵ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 15

²⁰⁶ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 22

Here Lenin prides himself on the ability to efface his personal feelings; as Leites argues, being a Bolshevik requires tremendous self-control.

After Lenin in the debate Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin spoke. His general line, like all the Left Communists is about International Revolution. He says that: “already at the beginning of the revolution we said that the Russian revolution will be saved just by world revolution, or will perish under the blows of international capital.”²⁰⁷ Bukharin thinks that the benefits arising from the signing of a peace treaty is an illusion. In response to Lenin he says: “This is necessary to make the conclusion that the force of the Austro-German imperialist coalition is not so big, that in comparison with it, which the Russian revolution is the only a simple, peaceful, little animal.”²⁰⁸

Clearly, in Bukharin we hear vast pride in the revolution; its success has provided euphoria which gives him extreme hopes. What a reversal this is! In September-October it was Lenin who was possessed by the enchanting vision of taking power, and other party members who were the skeptical realists, the moderates. Now they are extremists and he is the moderate--showing his amazing versatility. Lenin, for all his defects, has great qualities of leadership.

Bukharin bases himself on the assumption, shared with Lenin, that “peaceful coexistence between the Soviet Republic and international capital cannot be.”²⁰⁹ “We are destroying ourselves as the vanguard of world socialist revolution. Such a price cannot be paid for a two-day respite, which will not work.”²¹⁰ Bukharin goes on to place his faith in this: “Organization of the struggle is growing in the very process of struggle”²¹¹ Perhaps Bukharin and the other Left Communists is thinking about the mighty upsurge of energy during the “Revolutionary War” of France, in 1792--but this case is very different. Russia is not the France of 1792, which had inherited from the monarchy the finest army in Europe

²⁰⁷ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 24

²⁰⁸ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 26

²⁰⁹ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 29

²¹⁰ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 33

²¹¹ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 34

and adds to it a great cause and the liberated talents of ordinary people, nor is the German war machine the backward Austria and Prussia of 1792.

The next spokesman after Bukharin was Zinoviev who said that the terms of the peace treaty are not the disarming of the workers, not the destruction of the Red Army (Bukharin was referring to that), but this: “The horror lies not in fact that we are forced to demobilize, but that we have nothing to demobilize.”²¹² Zinoviev completely agrees with Lenin’s position, and declares that taking the stance of the opposition to peace means “committing suicide” over soviet power.²¹³

Then comes Bubnov. Being a Left Bolshevik, Bubnov thinks “defending their position they (the Leftists) are basing themselves on those positions and on those considerations, which once were developed by Comrade. Lenin.”²¹⁴ Bubnov says: “Massive general strikes in Austria and Germany suggest exactly the fact that the international movement took decisive steps forward... the proletariat now faces the task of civil war at the international level.”²¹⁵ This shows that the Party, more respectful of Lenin now, expects consistency of him. Lenin, however, is proud of his ability to *overcome* his personality, to assimilate himself to unpleasant facts. And this means overcoming his former position.

Lenin remains the limber gymnast of 1917, the conciliator of early September 1917 who turned into the aggressive revolutionary of mid-September. And he is right--to face the mighty German Army will be a disaster, a catastrophe which the weakly rooted proletarian dictatorship would be lucky to survive. If the mighty, well-disciplined and massively rearmed Soviet state of 1941 scarcely survived the German hurricane, what chance does the improvised, divided, and shaky Bolshevik government, not yet acknowledged in much of the country, have in spring 1917?

²¹² *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 46

²¹³ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 47

²¹⁴ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 49

²¹⁵ *Sedmoi Externi Syezd RKP (b)*, 50.

In the middle of this debate, on March 11, the capital is hurriedly moved from Petrograd to Moscow, because of German forces entering Finland; evidently the Bolshevik government does not trust the Germans to keep the signed Treaty. At last, on March 15, the 4th Congress of Soviets ratifies the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, but the Left SRs leave the Sovnarkom in protest; the highest organ of government is now entirely Bolshevik. This is the end of coalition government at the top, although many Left Socialist Revolutionaries remain in the Soviets, the bureaucracy, and particularly the Cheka and the Army. To achieve moderate aims in foreign policy, Lenin must sacrifice his reluctant moderation at home.

Civil War

After overthrowing the Tsar, Russia still was in the shadow of opposite threats from “Whites” who wanted to keep the old social order, and the “Reds”, who were willing to make world’s first social revolution. There were several coup attempts by both Whites and Reds. But only on October 24, 1917 had the Bolsheviks succeeded in staging a coup when armed workers, sailors and soldiers, organized by the Bolsheviks and acting in the name of the Soviets, removed Kerensky’s Provisional Government. On October 24-25, 1917, Red Guard took control over Petrograd. Soon after the Revolution Bolsheviks established a secret police called Cheka (future NKVD) which was hunting down opponents of Lenin. At the beginning Bolsheviks seized all the power, but soon backed down under popular pressure and formed a coalition with radical SRs. In 1918, however, Lenin signed the treaty with Germany and started socializing Russian agriculture, which was unacceptable for SRs, so in 1918 SR revolts on the Volga began, which became the start of “Red vs. Green” civil war. The Greens soon captured Kazan in August of 1918. Soon Kolchak joined the war with its White army and Red vs. White civil war began. The Whites included monarchists, militarists and for a short time non-Russian nationalists.²¹⁶

By the middle of November 1917 a limited form of Civil War had started on the border regions of Russia. On the side of the Whites were Don Cossacks who were fighting under

²¹⁶ The most interesting interpretation of this period is Geoffrey Swain, *Russia’s Civil War*, (Stroud: The History press, 2008)

Kaledin, Ural Cossacks – under Dutov, Ukrainian nationalists – under Petlyura and Vinnichenko, Monarchists – under Semenov in Eastern Siberia. The leading Tsarist officers of the regime also started to resist. In November, general Alekseev, the Tsar's Chief-of-Staff during WWI, began to organize a Volunteer Army in Novocherkassk. Volunteers mostly were the officers of the Old Russian Army, military cadets and students. In December 1917, Kornilov, Denikin and other Tsarist officers joined the Whites. Kornilov had been Commander-in-Chief of Russia armed forces during summer 1917. As for Denikin, he was Commander of the South-West Front. Main goal of the Whites was to remove Bolsheviks and recreate something like the Provisional Government; they did not define their political aims.

The Finnish Whites were led by Mannerheim and were helped by the Germans. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks took control of most of Russia, except Finland, Poland and the South Caucasus, but gradually – Yakutsk Guberniya in Siberia did not yield to the Bolshevik government until May 1918.

Czechs also played a crucial role in the Russian Civil War. The Czech Legion has been the part of the Russian army and numbered around 30,000 soldiers. These people were helping Kerensky's government in war against Germany and after the Provisional Government was removed, Trotsky, the Communist military commander, permitted them to travel through Russia to the Western Front so that they could continue their campaign against Germans, but they had to surrender most of their arms. In the course of the Czech movement across the vast expanse of Siberia, clashes broke out between Czechs and Red Guards. After this event, Czech soldiers captured strategic city of Simbirsk and by the August of 1918 they had captured the Trans-Siberian railway from Simbirsk to Vladivostok. They also overthrew Bolsheviks in Petropavlovsk and Omsk. Within a month the Whites controlled most of the Trans-Siberian railroad from Lake Baikal to the Ural mountain regions. During the summer, the Bolshevik power in Siberia was wiped out. In other words, the Czechs seized three-quarters of the area of Russia, beginning serious civil war. Because the Bolsheviks still had no effective military forces, there was a danger at this point they would suddenly collapse. This was one of the two moments when their rule was seriously threatened.

A Provisional Siberian anti-Bolshevik government was formed in Omsk. On July 26, 1918, the Whites captured Ekaterinburg. In May 1918, with the help of the Czech Legion, SRs took Samara and Saratov and established a Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly (KOMUCH).

After October many parts of Russian Empire slowly declared independence, although (as in 1990-92) it is difficult to know what they intended by this. The Tsentralnaya Rada declared the independence of Ukraine on January 12, 1918. In January of 1918 Soviet forces invaded Ukraine and besieged Kiev. Again in 1918, on January 24, the Moldavian Democratic Republic declared independence. In January of 1918 the Transcaucasian Parliament held its first meeting and a month later it announced the independent TDFR (Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic). Georgia declared independence in 1918, May 26. Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence shortly after Georgia, on May 28, 1918. Finland also declared independence in March of 1918. After Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918 the future Soviet Union gave up Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. All the territories, captured in the Russo-Turkish war of 1878 were given to the Ottoman Empire.

In September 1918 an organization called the Directory was established in Ufa, diminishing the power of Komuch. The Ufa Directorate was financed by the Czechs who raided Russia's gold reserve that were stored at Kazan. But in November of 1918 a military coup overthrew Komuch and Ufa Directorate and established its war minister Kolchak as a dictator.

In 1919 Kolchak and his army, routing the Red Army, took the city of Perm and advanced to the Volga. This posed some danger to Moscow, because the British were advancing from Archangelsk in the north, but this never happened, because Kolchak did not march on Moscow.

Despite criticism, Trotsky played very important role in Bolsheviks' success in the Civil war. He was willing to use ex-Tsarist officers in the Red Army, because the later lacked

experienced warriors. What is more, the bulk of the Red Army was not fighting because it strongly believed in Bolshevik ideology, but because, Lenin ordered to give the supply of food to the soldiers first.

As for Whites, they were made up of various groups who never coordinated with each other. They had different ideologies and objectives. As a result, they did not have a sole commander. This fact seriously weakened the Whites. Also, whites were nationalists and could not cooperate with non-Russians, this created another obstacle. More important is that they did not have peasants' support, while Bolsheviks promised land to peasantry, when Whites wanted to re-establish the old order. It is natural that peasants preferred the Bolsheviks over the Whites, while detesting both sides.

Entente Intervention

The Allies feared that the large amount of supplies and equipment in Russian ports might be commandeered by the Germans or the Bolsheviks. The landing of German troops in Finland also worried Allies, because, they feared the attempt of capture of Murmansk-Petrograd railroad, the strategic port of Murmansk and possibly Arkhangelsk. So, the Allies decided upon a military intervention in Russia. They wanted to resurrect the Eastern front by defeating the Bolshevik army with the help of the Czechoslovak Legion and stop the spread of Communism. In July 1918, President Wilson sent 5,000 US army soldiers to Arkhangelsk, while 8,000 soldiers were sent to Vladivostok. The British also sent troops to Russia. The Japanese sent 70,000 soldiers to establish a buffer state in Siberia. Japanese forces occupied Vladivostok and remained there until 1922. Because the total number of allied troops was only 100,000, one can hardly consider the military effort as serious. It was very serious as a source of supply, because industry and agricultural production were collapsing in the Bolshevik zone. The powers fighting Germany originally intervened to maintain some sort of anti-German front in the East, although they also disliked Bolshevik revolutionary aims.

During WWI the Allies were supporting the Whites, but as soon as the war was over the support reduced. In July 1919 Denikin's Army of South Russia began moving rapidly on Moscow from the South. Due to the mercurial nature of the Civil War, this advance had some hopes of capturing Moscow. But its rapidity was at the expense of properly organizing the rear, chaotic and eroded by anti-White anarchist "Third Force" guerrillas. The offensive proved too fragile and rapidly collapsed in October. The Whites in Russia lost the war. In 1920 Kolchak was executed and the Volunteer Army evacuated to the Crimea to join the army of General Wrangel.

Poland declared independence in 1918 and in 1920 invaded Ukraine. In 1919 the Polish army attacked Soviet forces and occupied Kiev. A few months later Polish Army occupied Vilnius and Lithuanian-Byelorussian SSR was dissolved. Now it was Poland's turn, so Trotsky's Red Army broke through the Poles' lines and advanced on Warsaw, but Poland's commander-in-chief Joseph Pilsudski led a successful counter-attack against Red Army, and as a result Treaty of Riga was signed on March 18, 1921. According to this Treaty, about ten million Ukrainians and White Russians were put under Polish rule. The Civil War was over, though some fights still went on until 1923 in Siberia; and until 1931 in Central Asia.

The Economy and the Bolsheviks

For Marxists, the economy is the "base," the determinant of social life, political institutions, and even ideas; all these ruling preoccupations of the human race are "superstructure." For Marx, the fundamental source of "the exploitation of man by man" is private property. The revolution is intended to abolish it in a stage called "communism." This is not instantly attainable; it is necessary to proceed through stages of "state capitalism" and "socialism" first. So, economic policy was vital for the Bolsheviks. Any economic transformations, however, were limited in the short run by the condition of Russia. Russia was a backward country, characterized by uneven development, with some branches of the economy almost on the general Western European level, others—mountain central Asia or the deserts — still literally living in the Middle Ages. And the empire was a country at war.

During the war, all European economies were tremendously stimulated by concentration, by zeal, by high investment, increase in the money supply, inflation, and huge changes in the disposition of the labor force and of industry. And the economies of less modern states were gradually being shaken to pieces by the sudden spurt of energy and by the effort to meet unaccustomed needs quickly. After passing through dearth of ammunition and other crises, the transportation system was beginning to break down and agricultural production to decline. The Provisional and even the Tsarist government had been driven to adopt some socialist measures but they may have been making problems worse, Russia's great cities were already suffering from insufficient food. The factories, their efforts channeled toward military production, were not producing a normal amount of consumer goods, therefore peasants were keeping food in their villages, further starving the cities.

Bolshevik policy toward industry

The Bolsheviks at times referred to their economic policy as state capitalism during their first eight months in power. They believed that it would be premature to attempt building full socialism in Russia before the European Revolution. Nonetheless the new government could not permit capitalism in Russia to remain unadulterated: it was to serve the worker's State. Martin Malia expresses well the way this process developed.

“State capitalism was the vehicle whereby the bourgeoisie was supposed to be made to serve the worker's state. In fact, this process developed through a dialectic where events promoted drastic action and the ideology radicalized these actions still further. Thus, when the employees of the State bank refused to provide the new government with new funds, armed detachments occupied the Bank on November 7, 1917 and nationalized it. Then ideology took over and five days later all private banks were nationalized and all foreign debts repudiated.²¹⁷

With one thoughtless act the Bolsheviks had cut off Russia's largest source of capital.

²¹⁷ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 124.

Except for a few big industries and the nationalization of industry began as a similar response to the disruptive force of worker “spontaneity”. There was a grain crisis in spring 1918 and workers began to divert production to whatever goods could be bartered for food. Thus workers took control of industry often evolved from supervision of management to outright takeover of the plant and then to local “nationalization”. These grass-roots nationalizations negated Bolshevik power.

Creation of Supreme Council of the National Economy - December 2, 1917

Vesenkha was created to deal with trade and industry, food supplies, agriculture, finance and trade unions- in short, everything connected with the economy. Very soon there were created departments called “glavki” to deal with various branches of industry- from textiles to metallurgy. And a sizeable bureaucracy had emerged to issue ever more detailed decrees that were regulating the activities over which it had nominal control by the spring. It was a necessity to cope with an increasingly chaotic situation.

On June 1918 the government decreed general nationalization by the state of all heavy industry. Over the next six months the government issued a flurry of decrees nationalizing light industry, wholesale trade, retail trade, the cooperatives and ultimately every last artisan or commercial enterprise in the country, down to those that had only five employees. Thus once again a process that began as a response to the challenge of events acquired ideological momentum that left the country owned and operated by the government. These measures pushed socialism to the point of absurdity; a shoe repair shop does not even conceivably benefit from nationwide management. Also attempted was, State control of distribution which was totally ineffective: “the market was not suppressed but driven underground and into illegality.”²¹⁸

From the crises of the spring of 1918 the momentum of the state intervene received a mighty impetus. The economic collapse that was already under way in the 1917 was accelerated by the exceptionally severe winter, but the process was now aggravated by the loss of Ukrainian

²¹⁸ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 128.

grain, iron, and coal as a result of Brest-Litovsk. The food situation in the cities had become desperate by April-May: the peasants had now no incentive to produce for the market. They received only worthless rubles but there were no consumer goods to buy. Lenin therefore decreed a “crusade for bread”. This program had become “class welfare in the villages” by the June, waged by the “Committees of the Village Poor” or Kombedy, to be considered shortly.

In 1921 Vesenkha had created a special unit for long-term economic coordination the State Planning Commission, Gosplan, which for that moment had little to do but was destined to play a central role in the system.

In 1920 the Bolsheviks were preparing to formally abolish money as if private property, profit and the market had been suppressed. Then there was no need for money. Much earlier inflation had grown so bad that people were being driven to the use of barter. This began during the war, when all warring governments financed the war effort by printing money. The Bolsheviks inflated the money supply more recklessly, progressively destroying its value. Only some Bolshevik officials supported the abolition of money, but it shows the amazing utopianism of early Bolshevism.

The militarization of labor, 1921

At the end of the Civil War Russia had a wrecked economy, huge army and no place for them to go due to the disorganization of industry and agriculture. The use of “labor armies” for civilian economic tasks was one response. Trotsky advocated this program, which was also defended by Bukharin. It meant literally running branches of industry like the Red Army. As Martin Malia explains,

For a time military units were used to reopen mines and factories and to get the railroads running again. Indeed, Lenin and most of the Party leadership for months after the end of the war believed that the methods of war communism in general were the right ones for arriving at socialism and should be continued indefinitely. Thus in a veritable ideological delirium the

most colossal economic collapse of the century was transmogrified into really-existing Communism, the radiant future *hic et nunc* [here and now], a vision projected in Bukharin's and Preobrazhenskii's once famous *ABC of Communism*.²¹⁹

The nationalization of credit and the creation of the basic framework for state control, Vesenkha, preceded Brest-Litovsk. The full nationalization of the industry, class warfare in the villages and Committees of the Village Poor - came in the late spring of 1918, all before serious conflict with whites."²²⁰

The Russian village and agriculture

Russian farming was not like western European or American farming. Most peasant land was communally owned by the *obshchina* or village community and periodically re-divided among the peasants to assure equal conditions of livelihood. Lenin had projected into the village the inequalities and hostilities that he saw in the larger society. In his first book, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, he claimed that capitalism was already massively transforming the village and that the peasants were divided into antagonistic groups of *kulaks*, *seredniaki* or middle peasants and *bedniaki* or poor peasants. He hated the first category, although the richest peasants were generally richer because they were older, had bigger families, or worked harder. He loved the *bedniaki* although he did not know any. When Lenin began his revolutionary agitation after February 1917 it contained very ambiguous attitudes towards the peasants; some slogans and symbolism spoke of the alliance of the working class and peasantry, soon to be symbolized by the hammer and sickle. But on many other occasions Lenin and the Bolsheviks spoke of their cause as the cause of the working class and the *poorest* peasants. In fact, the whole understanding of rural society was crude and schematic. Once again, understanding things was subordinated to fighting enemies; the unjust order Lenin saw in the whole society was projected onto the village. The village was actually a different culture. In the course of the revolution, most peasants who

²¹⁹ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 129.

²²⁰ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 129-130.

had set out on capitalist-style independent farming was forced back into the village commune, which showed great vitality and endured until Stalin's collectivization.

The two Revolutions had liquidated gentry landholding in the countryside, and temporarily made the peasants their own masters. Although their agitators advocated seizure of gentry lands by the peasants, this agrarian revolution was neither commanded nor controlled by the Bolsheviks. Once the peasants had the land they lost interest in politics.

The confiscation was facilitated by the left wing of the SRs who seceded from the main SR party in October to support the Bolsheviks seizure of power because they thought it meant Soviet power. Thus Lenin was able to claim that his Soviet government represented a "revolutionary alliance of workers and peasants" And this was the real meaning of his Decree on Land of October 25, socializing the land in accordance with the traditional SR program. However the government could do nothing to determine the course of events in the country side.²²¹

Food-Supply Dictatorship

By April, food was becoming really scarce in the cities, though not yet at a crisis level. The Bolsheviks were convinced that the kulaks were hoarding the missing grain, not only to benefit from higher prices but to bring down the workers' government by starving it out—an extraordinary explosion of paranoia. In response, on 9-13 May 1918, a "Food Dictatorship" was proclaimed and armed requisitioning of grain was made general policy. The core of the decree read as follows:²²²

1. By keeping firmly the grain monopoly and fixed prices and also carrying out a merciless struggle against grain speculators and bagmen [petty traders who carried goods from place to place], to *compel* each grain holder to declare the surrender of all surpluses, except the quantity needed for consumption *on established norms* until the

²²¹ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 103.

²²² *Pravda*, 15 May 1918 (no. 93), italics mine.

next harvest in one week after the notification of this decree in each *volost*. Thus rules applying to the orders [of delivery] will be defined by the local food procurement organs of *Narkomprod*.

2. To invite all toiling people and propertyless peasants to unite immediately in a *merciless struggle against the kulaks*.
3. To declare enemies of the nation all people having surpluses of grain and not handing them over to the station points and *even* dissipating the stocks of cereals for their own home brew instead of delivering them to the collecting stations; to bring them to the revolutionary courts put them in jails for not less than ten years, *confiscate all their belongings*, banish them out of the *obshchina*, and *condemn the holders of home brew to forced labor* in public works.
4. In the case of discovery any surplus of grain which had not been declared for delivery, according to point 1, *grain will be requisitioned without payment*, and half of the value which was due at fixed prices for the undeclared surplus will be *paid to the people who took part in discovering the surpluses*, after they have been in fact received in the collecting stations, and the other half to the agriculture community. Information about discovery of surpluses has to be reported to the local food procurement organs.

This extraordinary document was produced seven months after the arrival of the Communist regime and prior to any serious external threat. As yet there was no allied intervention, the Germans had been bought off, and the remnant White Cossack groups and volunteers fighting in the periphery represented a marginal annoyance—until May 30, 1918, when the Czech corps rebelled and Civil War suddenly became serious. So it is a product of the inner momentum of the Bolshevik movement, triggered by a significant but not desperate shortage of food for city-dwellers. Nevertheless, it is a compendium of abstract thinking, fantasy, and cruelty. The keyword is “to compel.” Yet the Bolsheviks had at this time no mechanism of enforcement in the villages, where even the Tsarist administrative network, now shattered, was very thin. It is not that the Bolsheviks use for a practical purpose an instrument they possess, but that they imagine an instrument that could satisfy their desire for coercion. What they resorted to was punitive detachments, later called the “food army,” that plundered the villages, allegedly in alliance with the village poor. For the second keynote

here is “merciless struggle,” the urge to divide communities and inculcate internecine hatred, in the name of the community. In fact, the “village poor” often had to be filled up with unemployed city workers, vagrants, and ruffians. The Food Dictatorship of mid-May 1918 refutes the version of Soviet history according to which the Civil War militarized Bolshevism and made it coercive—although the Civil War clearly worsened already existing Bolshevik tendencies.

What is perhaps most astonishing in this agricultural policy is the absence of any thought of incentives—except selfish interest at the expense of other villagers, and hatred of village rivals. The whole problem is that peasants are not selling enough grain. An obvious answer is to pay them more. But at this very time industrial prices are being set artificially high in comparison with agricultural prices, discouraging the peasants from selling. There is an incomprehension of economics built on an incomprehension of psychology.

Prodrazverstka in 1919 was the next stage, the state requisition of grain by “proletarian” detachments as Malia states:

These grain requisitions were compulsory, although official policy stated that food deliveries were to come from peasant surpluses of food. In reality, state policy took two main forms: very low prices paid to peasants for their grain, so that the [requisition](#) essentially amounted to confiscation; or outright confiscation of all the grain possessed by the peasantry, with no payment. The policy of grain requisition was used as an instrument of class warfare in the countryside, setting poor and middle peasants against rich peasants, the so-called kulaks. The policy of prodrazverstka was bitterly opposed by the vast majority of peasants and led to widespread violence in the countryside against the committees of poor peasants (*kombedy*) that worked for the Soviet state to seize grain that was being hoarded by peasant households. In response to the confiscation of their grain, peasant households drastically reduced the [acreage](#) cultivated and the amount of grain produced, which led to mass [starvation](#) and [famine](#) throughout the nation....At times the requisition was in exchange for consumer goods and at other times it was simply confiscated at gunpoint; but in both cases it was forced. However this policy too was not really a success beyond meeting the

minimal needs of Party survival, for what little surplus grain there was went increasingly to the black market. Worse still, *prodrazverstka* was so disruptive of production that it was a major cause, together with drought, of the disastrous famine 1921-22.²²³

War communism, June 1918

These policies, and the increasingly anti-market industrial ones, merged into "War communism", declared in June 1918 but not under that name. As Martin Malia points out, "war communism" was a later Soviet term implying that its extreme economic policy was an emergency response to the Civil War. Originally, it was conceived as the beginning of the final, Communist stage of social development—which with amazing Utopianism was supposed to be beginning less than a year after the beginning of Socialism. It was a frenzied leap into an imagined paradise comparable to the Muenster Commune or to the Qarmati abrogation of Islamic law. War Communism was enforced, and supposedly organized, by the [Supreme Economic Council](#), known as the *Vesenkha*. It ended on March 21, 1921 with the beginning of the NEP ([New Economic Policy](#)), which lasted until 1928. War communism included the following policies:

1. Industry was nationalized, and supposed strict centralized management was introduced.
2. A state monopoly on foreign trade introduced.
3. Discipline for workers was strict, in principle--[strikers](#) could be shot.
4. Obligatory labor duty was imposed onto the "non-working classes."
5. [Prodrazvyorstka](#) – requisition of [agricultural](#) surpluses from [peasants](#) in excess of absolute minimum for centralized distribution among the remaining population.
6. Food and most commodities were [rationed](#) and distributed in a centralized way.
7. Private enterprise became illegal.
8. The state introduced military-style control of [railroads](#).

1921 Famine

²²³ Malia , *Soviet Tragedy*, 127

By 1921 there was a national famine which began in the early spring of 1921. The harvests of 1920 and 1921 were half those of 1913. The famine killed an estimated 5 million people [affecting mostly](#) the [Volga-Ural region](#) which was a theatre of Civil War. The famine resulted from the combined effect of many factors. The disruption of the agricultural production, which already started during [World War I](#) continued through the disturbances of the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#) and [Russian Civil War](#) with its policy of [War Communism](#) (especially [prodrazvyorstka](#)). A bad drought that happened in 1921 worsened the situation to the level of the national catastrophe.

Conclusion

The Revolution and Civil War unfolded the most extreme radicalization of the Soviet regime. One might argue that the Great Terror of 1936-38 represented the Soviet regime at its most extreme, and certainly many more people were murdered then than during the Civil War—particularly if one does not count the 1921 famine. But the punitive means of the Communist state, and the territory it controlled, were far more limited during the civil war. The Great Terror also targeted a higher proportion of people known to be innocent than the Red Terror of the Civil War; the Secretariat of the Central Committee sent out telegrams, circulated beforehand to its members for their agreement, setting numerical quotas for executions (and arrests), regardless of the judicial process (itself unfair) or the evidence. And the Party was not devouring itself during the Civil War as it was after 1936. But there are also many telegrams from Lenin advocating punitive executions of the innocent.

But the *aims* of Communist policy were much more expansive in the civil war: to reach the final, Utopian stage of human history, Communism, in two or three years after attaining state power, and with it the abolition of private ownership and money. In later Soviet history, Communism was only said to be approaching slowly. Stalin's collectivization conceded more to private property than the ostensible agricultural policy of the Civil War, the "exchange" of peasant grain for industrial products, without money. Nikita Khrushchev, whose reign marked a limited return of populism and Utopianism, said that his very simplified version of the Communist stage would begin in 1981. It did not. Under Brezhnev, there was an

unsatisfactory attempt to partly boast of, and partly postpone this goal, with the addition of a new intermediate, pre-communist stage, the “state of the whole people.” At the end of Brezhnev’s life, the question of whether to some suppress the Communist future altogether, as advocated by some ideologists such as Vadim Pechenev,²²⁴ or somehow revived. Gorbachev opted for the latter, with disastrous results for the regime.

To plot the trajectory of Soviet extremism is a complex task that can only be summarized here. There are very different curves in domestic and foreign policy. Both begin together with a maximum spike of extremism in the Civil War and just after, then moderating with NEP and the Locarno treaty with Germany. Then the domestic curve becomes more radical again with collectivization and industrialization, and still more radical with the Great Terror. With the appointment of Beria to the NKVD, in 1938, the regime moderated, followed by the relative gain of Malenkov’s policies over Zhdanov’s. The Second World War is a period of moderation and concession to popular desires, followed by re-radicalization with the campaigns against “cosmopolitans” and Jews. In various forms this persisted until Stalin’s death. Beria’s incipient de-Stalinization, followed by Khrushchev’s in 1956, begins an era of phases extreme in form—they are revolutionary, or rather counter-revolutionary, changes—but moderate in content. After Brezhnev’s moderate era of stagnation, extremism returned with Andropov. At the end Gorbachev grandly and explosively returned to revolutionary change, but with moderate, Westernizing content.

In foreign and military policy the fairly moderate ‘twenties became more adaptive, and perhaps more moderate, with the Popular Front efforts against Hitler. The Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939 was a new mode of traditional statecraft, and the wartime alliance even more so. It was the Cold War that was the most extreme phase of foreign policy after the beginning. Within it there were many oscillations between confrontation and “peaceful coexistence.” With Brezhnev Soviet foreign and military policy separated, the diplomatic remaining fairly conciliatory, except in the Third World, while a threatening military buildup swelled. Andropov, with his covert threats of war, produced a final, and third, peak of extremism, and

²²⁴ Vadim Pechenev, *Vzlyot i padeniye Gorbacheva*, chapters 1 and 2.

Gorbachev's New Thinking moderated foreign policy on a scale unprecedented in Soviet history.

If we look more at foreign and military policy, Stalin and his more and more heavily armed successors certainly were more dangerous, and to more distant countries, than Lenin. Again, this is largely a result of the much more effective armed forces available to later Soviet leaders. But Stalin had more sense of the practical than Lenin; he doubted the coming of world revolution even in 1917. Only at the end of the Civil War was there a hope for an immediate revolution in central Europe, which would quickly spread to the rest of Europe, and then to Europe's colonies. Nathan Leites collected in one of his extraordinary footnotes the evidence from Lenin's statements:

Lenin ended a speech on March 6, 1919, with the following sentence:

“ . . . those present in this hall . . . will all see the foundation of the Federal World Republic of Soviets.”(Speech to the Central Executive Committee of Soviets)
(Lenin, V.I. , *Sochineniya*, 3rd ed., vol 24, p.31)

In a speech made in the spring of 1919, he repeated:

“In a number of countries, the Soviet power has already been victorious. In a short time we shall see the victory of Communism all over the world, we shall see the foundation of the Federal World Republic of Soviets.” *Ibid.*,p. 194.

Again on April 11, 1919:

“ . . . in a few months we shall be victorious throughout the whole world.” (Speech to a Trade Union Congress)
Ibid., p. 242 .

On July 6, 1919, Lenin moderated his point slightly:

“ . . . taking account of all experiences . . . of this year, we say with certainty . . . that this July is the last difficult July, that next July we shall be celebrating the victory of the International Soviet Republic, and that this victory will be full and irrevocable.” (Speech to a Moscow Party conference)

Ibid., p.381.

In September he began to speak about:

” . . . that period during which socialist and capitalist governments will exist side by side.”
(Letter to the American Workers, September 23, 1919)

Ibid., p. 466.

And in an article on the anniversary of the seizure of power, Lenin returned in a veiled form to his usual position, according to which delays are unpredictable in length as well secondary in importance:

“The victory of the Soviet power all over the world is already secured. The question is merely one of time.”(*Bednota*, November 7, 1919)

Ibid, p. 521.²²⁵

The practical vehicle for these worldwide ambitions was the Polish war of 1920-21, which Lenin hoped would communize Poland and then Germany, sparking a revolution throughout Europe. This was the single most ambitious Soviet military move in the history of the regime.

To most of us these hopes will seem as insane as those of the Qarmatis of Bahrayn, or of the Anabaptists of Muenster. But they are simply utopianism, in its modern, secular form, fully unleashed. Like the ‘Abbasids, Qarmatis or the German Reformation, Soviet Communism showed its maximum extremism very close to its beginning. And the extremism of Soviet Communism was more extreme than earlier extremism. Or at least the possession

²²⁵ Leites, *Study of Bolshevism*, 543-544.

of a modern state and modern technology gave it the potential to carry out an extremist agenda much more fully. The strange result was its early destruction: the Soviet Union is also unusual in lasting seventy-four years, a very short time on the scale of world history. A perceptive cartoon in *Ogonyok*, in 1990, suggested the deepest reason. A typical Soviet apparatchik, thick-necked and shaven-headed, is at his typical Soviet official's desk with its multiple telephones. Over him is a typical Soviet banner, "The Decision of the Party-into Life!" And he is resolutely holding a revolver to his temple. Perhaps Soviet communism was so extreme that it destroyed itself. Did not Gorbachev say, "Perestroika is a revolution?"