

# Human Will Versus the “Objective” Forces of History

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Following the first paragraph of Part III.C of my October 12, 2004 letter to Dr. Skrbina I should have pointed out that if human will can be a factor in natural selection as it acts on human societies, it is also true that human will is itself acted upon by natural selection, not only by natural selection among individuals, but also by natural selection among societies. Human beings' personalities and value-systems, and therefore the kinds of choices and decisions they make (their "will"), are to an important extent influenced by the social environment (including, but by no means limited to, systems of propaganda) in which they grow up. If a society provides a social environment that influences people to make choices and decisions conducive to the survival and propagation of the society, then that society will be favored by natural selection. Hence, such societies will tend to replace other societies. So human will is not a purely external factor that acts upon the process of natural selection among societies; it is itself to a great extent a product of that process. Viewed in this way, the evolution of societies looks more deterministic. But social environments mold human beings' wills only in a *statistical* sense; there are always individual exceptions. And under certain circumstances the decisions of individuals or small groups can have an important and long-lasting effect on the course of history.<sup>1</sup> See the hypothetical example of the Bering Strait in Part III.A of my October 12, 2004 letter to Dr. Skrbina. For a real-life example, the Reformation could not have occurred without the social conditions that made a religious revolution possible, but the social conditions by themselves were not sufficient; a Luther was needed to strike the spark that ignited the revolutionary process. "The phenomenon that became the Protestant Reformation is unthinkable without the sense of mission and compelling personality of Martin Luther."<sup>2</sup> It might be objected that if Martin Luther had never lived, some other Luther would have arisen sooner or later to strike the spark. But in Luther's time European society was already approaching the threshold of a gradual process of secularization.<sup>3</sup> Once the process of secularization had proceeded far enough, religious passions would no longer have been sufficiently strong for the

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<sup>1</sup> "[individual causes can produce general results, especially in revolutions." Simon Bolivar, "Contestation de un Americano Meridional a un caballero de esta isla," letter dated at Kingston, Jamaica, Sept. 6, 1815; in Soriano, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> NEB (2010), Vol. 20, "Germany," p. 87. Max Weber would have agreed, for he clearly implied that "the Reformation [would have been] inconceivable without Luther's entirely personal religious development." Weber, pp. 79 80. See also Note 124 to Extracts from Letters to David Skrbina, and Hoffer, § 90: "Once the stage is set, the presence of an outstanding leader is indispensable. Without him there will be no movement. The ripeness of the times does not automatically produce a mass movement... ."

<sup>3</sup> The heliocentric theory of Copernicus (1473 1543) doubtless had something to do with the process of secularization, and the discoveries of European explorers, begun in the 15th century by the Portuguese and the Spanish, probably played a significant role in initiating the process. See Bury, pp. 40 45. A definite foretaste of the secularization process can be detected in the work of Francis Bacon (1561 1626). Ibid., pp. 58 59. On the spread of rationalism during the 17th century, see *ibid.*, pp. 127 28.

Reformation as we know it to have been possible. If Martin Luther had never lived, it is not certain that another Luther would have arisen *in time* to produce the Reformation.

For a further example, take Hitler and World War II. It may have been inevitable that Germany during the 1930s would fall under the control of a nationalistic dictator of fascist type, but World War II would not have been inevitable if the dictator had been anyone other than Hitler. Once he had erased the Treaty of Versailles, annexed Austria and other German-speaking areas, and occupied Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, Hitler's prestige and his power were immense; he was sure to be set down in history as a "great man." A "normal" fascist dictator would have stopped at that point. Mussolini may be taken to represent the "normal" fascist dictator, and he was clearly worried about the consequences of Hitler's overweening and reckless ambition, for he wrote to the Fuhrer on January 3, 1940 urging him to be satisfied with what he had already achieved, and to create a sovereign and independent Poland in order to deprive the Western democracies of any justification for war.<sup>4</sup> If Hitler had been a "normal" fascist he would have taken Mussolini's advice, or rather, he would not have invaded Poland in the first place. World War II occurred only as a result of Hitler's willingness to take extreme risks for the sake of grandiose rewards.

It is impossible to say with any confidence what the long-term consequences for human history would have been if World War II had not occurred, but some of the short-term consequences are obvious enough: The prestige of fascism would have remained high; most of Central Europe would have been governed by fascists; fascist movements throughout the world would have grown stronger; and democracy would have been seriously weakened.

Moreover, there is general agreement that it was World War II that lifted the United States out of the Great Depression.<sup>5</sup> War in the Pacific against Japan might well have sufficed, but it is unlikely that Japan would have dared to undertake a war against the Western powers if France and the Netherlands had not been crushed by the Germans, and if Britain had not been preoccupied with the war in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Without American involvement in a war, the Depression would have continued—for how long, and with what consequences, can only be a matter for conjecture.

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<sup>4</sup> Kosthorst, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Rostow, pp. 77-79; NEB (2003), Vol. 29, "United States of America," p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., "World Wars," pp. 1000-01.

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