

a "political pilgrim." He did not describe in only "positive" terms the New Soviet Man. His description of the director of the publication *Atheist* is hardly suitable propaganda, and his vision of Baku, the petroleum capital, pierces through the repetitive chatter of the Soviet guides: "It was raining, a biting cold. We waded in the mud, inside a forest of drilling towers. The air was greasy, the earth vomited oil. Black-green bogs everywhere . . . Here in this contemporary inferno, blackened workers, oiled like rats, struggled to earn their daily bread, smeared by fumes and petroleum." By the late 1930's Kazantzakis held the belief that Communism was more exploitative and materialistic than capitalism. He likened it to a forest fire that had to run its course in order to build a new society. Nor did his Soviet hosts ever publish any of his books, or allow them to be sold.

Perhaps the lasting significance of the trips to Russia lies in the thought and experience it provided for Kazantzakis' masterpiece, the *Odyssey*. He began drafting it before his Russian tours and devoted himself to it immediately afterwards, completing the work in 1938 at the age of 55. Most of the other fiction for which he has received world acclaim was written after World War II, in a remarkable spurt of crea-

tivity that seems to have required, as with Odysseus, a lifetime of soul searching, and many travels.

Michael Warder is executive vice president of The Rockford Institute.

Dionysus in the Trenches

by Gregory J. Sullivan

**The Rites of Spring:
The Great War and the Birth
of the Modern Age**

by Modris Eksteins

Boston and New York: Houghton
Mifflin Co.; 396 pp., \$24.95

In his masterly *Ideas Have Consequences*, Richard Weaver (who was fond of the long view) marked the decline of the West from the late 14th century with the development of William of Occam's doctrine of nominalism. In the short view, though, it is obvious that the Great War was the watershed of modernity: what remained of the center was destroyed forever. The role of modernism in the culture that plunged into the trenches is a relatively unexamined one. Modris

Eksteins argues in *Rites of Spring* that inasmuch as modernism represents "the principal urge of our time," it figures prominently in the orgy of slaughter that has given this century its nightmarish quality.

On May 29, 1913, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Stravinsky-Diaghilev-Nijinsky ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* opened. Eksteins' thesis is that this ballet, which Stravinsky had originally titled *The Victim*, constitutes "One of the supreme symbols of our centrifugal and paradoxical century . . . with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, [it is] perhaps the emblematic oeuvre of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, had killed off millions of its best human beings." *Le Sacre du printemps*, moreover, tokened the radical shift in artistic intention that we have come to associate with modernism; with this work, Eksteins says, "Art has transcended reason, didacticism, and a moral purpose: art has become provocation and event," and thus central to the turbulence of the age.

Eksteins traces the avant-garde's obsession with the life-through-death motif into the German soul. Germany—"the modernist nation *par excellence*," as he puts it—craved war to affirm life, vitality; war, in fact, was seen as "a spiritual necessity." The war, then, was not merely a war of territorial conquest.

Drawing extensively on letters and diaries, Eksteins is able to take the reader into the trenches, so to speak, vividly recreating their appalling horror, mud, and tedium. Men perished in mass numbers in this mass war (60,000 British troops were killed on the first days at the Somme); so, too, did the abstractions that motivated them to fight dutifully for God and country. As Hemingway's Lt. Frederic Henry remarks in *A Farewell to Arms*: "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." And with language went "Reality, a sense of proportion, and reason," which Eksteins maintains "were the major casualties of the war."

Depicting the ethos of this time is not easy, but Eksteins isolates two key events that are highly illustrative. First, he provides a fine interpretation of the

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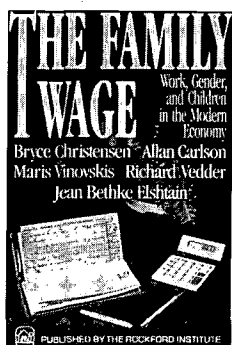
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enthusiastic reception of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a work that utterly captivated an international audience mired in despair. Second, into this malaise flew Charles Lindbergh, the solitary American hero who was treated as a god in Europe. He was seen as the new technological messiah, his flight symbolic of the idea that "Man has been set loose. Freedom was no longer a matter of being at liberty to do what is morally right and ethically responsible. Freedom had become a personal matter, a responsibility above all to oneself."



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Irrationalism, despair, technology—add kitsch and the stage is set for the Nazi version of the dance of death. At the outset of *Rites of Spring*, Eksteins intimates that "Nazi kitsch may bear a blood relationship to the highbrow religion of art proclaimed by many moderns." Later, he makes the connection explicit: "Nazism was a popular variant of many of the impulses of the avant-garde. It expressed on a more popular level many of the same tendencies and posited many of the same solutions that the avant-garde did on the level of 'high art.' Above all, it, like the moderns it claimed to despise, tried to marry subjectivism and technicism." Certainly the futuristic emphasis—which assumes a repudiation of conventions, values, and ultimately history—of the avant-garde was shared by the Nazis. Eksteins rejects the view of Nazism as reactionary or conservative. "Contrary to many interpretations of Nazism," as he observes,

which tend to view it as a reactionary movement . . . the general thrust of the movement, despite archaisms, was futuristic. Nazism was a headlong plunge into the future, toward a "brave new world." Of course it used to full advantage residual conservative and utopian longings, paid its respects to these romantic visions . . . but its goals were, by its own lights, distinctly progressive. . . . The intention of the movement was to create a new type of human being from whom would spring a new morality, a new social system, and eventually a new international order.

In Nazism, that is, the ideals of the avant-garde had found a home, as they had settled in Germany prior to the Great War. Hitler, of course, was at the eye of the storm, and Eksteins sees him as "The ultimate kitsch artist, he filled the abyss with symbols of beauty. The victim he turned into the hero, hell into heaven, death into transfiguration." When the end came for Hitler, he was in his bunker, surrounded by the destruction he had unleashed, and in the canteen of the chancellery a dance began and continued even after word had been sent from the bunker to quiet down. Eksteins' terse final sentence is

arresting: "A popular German song in 1945 was entitled 'Es ist ein Frühling ohne Ende!' ('It Is Spring Without End!')."

But for all of Eksteins' sophisticated cultural and social insights, he surprisingly neglects any extended treatment of Christianity—or, rather, the absence of Christianity—in this entire tragedy. After all, as Paul Johnson argues in *Modern Times*, it is "the decline and ultimate collapse of the religious impulse" and the ascent of moral relativism that is largely responsible for the terrifying fragmentation of our century. Also, the modernist movement is more diverse than Eksteins suggests. Continental modernists may have diabolically reveled in the dissolution that they helped engender, but the Anglo-American version of modernism—one thinks of Eliot, Faulkner, and David Jones—sought a way back to the center. Still, "The Great War," as he says, "was to be the axis on which the modern world turned," and its cultural causes and consequences are comprehensively and, at times, brilliantly examined in *Rites of Spring*. I had not thought death had undone so many.

Gregory J. Sullivan writes from Trenton, New Jersey.

Learning to Behave

by Joseph Baldacchino

**The Fatal Conceit:
The Errors of Socialism**
by F.A. Hayek

Chicago: University of Chicago Press;
180 pp., \$24.95

When I heard on the radio one morning in 1974 that Friedrich Hayek had won the Nobel Prize in economics, my first thought was, "Not our Friedrich Hayek?" A few hours later, upon meeting a libertarian acquaintance of some prominence, I asked, "Did you hear about Hayek?" The reply was: "No. Did he die?"

I offer these vignettes because they illustrate how dramatically the assessment of Hayek, even among his most ardent admirers, has changed over the last decade and a half. It is hard to