INTRODUCTION

THIS ESSAY RAISES two interrelated questions. It does not claim to answer them exhaustively. The first deals with historical awareness, which, today, appears to me to be seriously divided. The disagreement concerns what most characterizes the twentieth century compared to all others: the extraordinary scale of the massacre of men by men, which was made possible only by the rise to power of Leninist communism and Hitlerian Nazism. These "heterozygous twins" (Pierre Chaunu), despite being enemies and emerging from dissimilar histories, share several common traits. Their goal was to achieve a perfect society by uprooting the evil that hindered its creation. They claimed to be philanthropic because they sought the good—one of all mankind and the other of the German people—and because this ideal gave rise to enthusiastic devotion and heroic acts. But what they have most in common is that they arrogated themselves the right—and even the duty—to kill, and they both did so with similar methods, on a scale unknown in history.

Today, however, historical memory does not treat them equally. Although Nazism completely disappeared more than half a century ago, our abhorrence of it is not at all weakened by time, and rightly so. Our horrified reflection on Nazism seems to even gain in breadth and depth each year. Communism, on the other hand, although still fresh and just recently fallen, benefits from an amnesia and an amnesty that receive the almost unanimous consent, not only of its supporters—because they still exist—but of its most determined enemies, and even its victims. Neither side judges it fitting to bring it back from oblivion. Sometimes Dracula's coffin opens halfway. This is what happened at the end of 1997, when a book (*The Black Book of Communism*) dared to tally the deaths that could be attributed to communism. The book suggested a range of 85 to 100 million. The scandal was short-lived and the coffin is already closing again—without, however, anyone seriously contesting these figures.

I recently had the opportunity to study this contrast between the amnesia concerning communism and the hypermnesia concerning Nazism. I addressed it briefly from the rather narrow point of view of the historical and political conditions that might explain why communism has been forgotten.[1] The subject needed a more detailed examination that includes other viewpoints. This is the purpose of the first part of this essay.

The second question relates to the Shoah. To what degree, in the context of the century's tremendous slaughter, must it be considered distinct? Can one consider it as just one tomb among others within the general cemetery? And if not, why not?

That the Shoah haunts the historical consciousness of the century in general, and the relationship or comparison between the memory of communism and that of Nazism in particular, is easier to point out than to explain. I had felt this strongly myself during my speech as I emphasized why the Jewish people had taken responsibility for the memory of the Shoah: out of a moral obligation linked to the long memory of persecutions; out of a religious obligation linked to Job-like praising and impassioned questioning of the Lord who promised to protect his people and who punishes crime and injustice. Humanity has Jewish memory to thank for reverently preserving the records of the Shoah. The enigma lies in the fact that there are peoples who have forgotten.

The difficulty stems from the fact that, in order to answer the second question, one must move to another level. Communism and Nazism can, indeed, be considered two species of the same genus, the *ideological* genus. Their appeal, the nature and mode of their power, and their type of crime stem from the mindset upon which they entirely depend: ideology. By this term I mean a doctrine that, in exchange for conversion, promises a temporal salvation that claims to conform to a cosmic order whose evolution has been scientifically deciphered and requires a political practice aimed at radically transforming society. One might push the comparison between communism and Nazism even further, noting their differences and similarities, without leaving the realm of historical and political analysis.

On the contrary, with the Shoah we immediately leave that realm. Even though politics, particularly in France, attempts to make the Shoah an issue, to force it into the endless struggle between the "right" and "left," this catastrophe is on an entirely different level, like a very solemn and burning hearth that is self-sustaining, far from the struggles of the public square. Our consciousness of the Shoah does not fit within a purely political analysis; it is ill at ease with making the Shoah the object of comparative, neutral, "scientific" study. It maintains the ineffable sense of an event that is unique in this century and in all of time, requiring something other than objective study: a special reverence, a sacred silence. We are no longer in the history of ideology, but in the history of religion—even in religion itself, the Jewish religion initially, and as a result, the Christian religion.

The fact remains that the two questions—the comparative historical awareness of the two murderous ideologies and the awareness of the Shoah—are linked. The sense of the uniqess of the Shoah emerged slowly from the confused memory of Nazism. This is not unrelated to the different treatment reserved for communism.

It is risky to deal with two series of events that differ in nature and are separated by time and space, but that history has nevertheless obscurely connected. In order to clarify this obscurity to the best of my ability, I briefly trace the genealogy of the problem. Next, I make a step-by-step comparison of communism and Nazism from the point of view of the destruction they have caused in the physical, moral, and political realms. I confess that, having already dealt with the subject extensively, I had really hoped—because it is so distressing—not to revisit it. But circumstances brought me back. I then venture into theology to try to locate exactly the uniqueness of the Shoah. I conclude in favor of uniqueness, but realize that agreement on the meaning of this uniqueness is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

THE ISSUE OF the uniqueness of the Shoah, of which I think the victims were immediately aware, did not fully emerge into public consciousness until several years after the event. Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*), now universally recognized as one of the most moving accounts of Auschwitz ever written, was penned the moment the author returned to Italy. It was turned down by several major publishers, but published all the same in 1947 when a small company printed 2,500 copies of the work. The company soon went bankrupt, and the book fell into oblivion. It was republished by Einaudi in 1958, and the fame it gained was so well deserved that its previous obscurity exposes one aspect of the enigma. "In this difficult postwar period," Levi explains, "people were not overly eager to relive the painful years which had just passed." The analysis is accurate, but it is vague and insufficient. In the aftermath of the war every deportation camp evoked the same horror, and the distinction between forced-labor camps (such as Buchenwald) and death camps (such as Treblinka) was not clearly made. Everyone felt sorry for the victims; no one thought to distinguish between categories. At the Nuremberg trials, people referred only to the "persecution" of the Jews. In reading Primo Levi, it is evident that in his camp and his commando (work team) the Jews occupied the very last circle of hell; but there were other circles, composed also of non-Jews—there were many in Auschwitz—and every prisoner, including the most criminal Kapo, was denied the quality of being human. This is the metaphysical core of the book, already announced in the title. As with any event that surpasses the imagination, the deportation went through an amnesic phase—or a phase combining amnesia and aphasia—which spared neither the prisoners nor the surviving Jews among them. The unspeakable is not easily said. It was time that made it possible to bring into focus this subject which cannot be apprehended directly.

But in order for the topic of the Shoah's specificity, of its *uniqueness,* to attain general historical consciousness, a great event had to take place. A second event was also necessary for the topic of the *comparison* between Nazism and communism to reach this consciousness.

THE FIRST EVENT involved a considerable increase in the "visibility" of the Jewish people. The Jews were emancipated during the nineteenth century, and, like other religious groups, they were granted their religious rights, the freedom of "Israelite worship." They were not, however, given specific civic rights. Since biblical times, Judaism has always been understood as inextricably both a religion and a people. Sometimes this second half of Jewish identity had to be abandoned, even forgotten, in Western democracies; at other times, it had to be carried like a burden in countries where the modern concept of citizenship had not erased the concept of "ethnic character." Nazism had replaced the concept of people with the concept of race, and it had excluded this particular "race" from mankind. In postwar Europe, the concept of a "Jewish people" no longer had any foundation. In the Western world, there were citizens—English, French, Italian, etc.—who were Jewish because of their "origins" or confession. In the communist world, the Jewishness of the Jews was theoretically destined for obliteration, and in the meantime, it was forbidden to claim it.

There was a third element in Jewish consciousness: land. In 1948 the Jewish people appeared to the world in the modern form of a largely secular national state, enjoying the total independence that they had lost during the Assyrian and then Babylonian conquests, and a territorial presence that had been all but wiped out from the time of the Jewish wars of Titus and Hadrian. Thanks to the Law of Return, the Hebrew state established itself as the rightful homeland of all the Jews throughout the world.

The countries under communist domination recognized the state of Israel for varying political reasons. Democratic countries had more reliable reasons for recognizing it, because, aside from political motives, what might be called religious motives were at work. The Christian world was beginning to develop a sense of guilt, which was to grow further. Religious consciousness of Jewishness, which had been obscured over the centuries by the direction taken by the interpretation of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church Fathers, was reemerging and beginning to ferment in the Catholic world. This was the starting point of an enormous reversal, of which Vatican II was only a stage, a reversal that is not yet complete.

Thus, in most instances, the Western world rather easily accepted the new self-image that the Jews had developed of themselves as a result of the founding of Israel. In particular, the West accepted that the Jews, who have always had a deep sense of patriotism towards their various diasporic homelands, might develop a second patriotism directed towards Israel, albeit a patriotism informed by a different feeling and a different kind of loyalty. One might well compare this right of double patriotism—which public opinion would not have granted to other minorities—to the equally exceptional, precarious, and in this case purely religious privilege of exemption from imperial worship and civic religion obtained by the Jews around the time of Herod the Great.

This new awareness of Jewish identity developed spontaneously and gradually. Nevertheless, one important year should be mentioned: 1960. Until then, Israel's patriotic feelings thrived on memories of the armed resistance to Nazism. The insurrection of the ghetto of Warsaw was more willingly evoked than the passively experienced genocide. The Eichmann trial, which Israeli authorities hoped would cause a public stir, marked a change of course. The Shoah became a central and, in some respects, foundational event, a basis of legitimacy. It was the starting point for a legal, moral, philosophical, and theological debate in which illustrious minds from around the world (Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, and Gershom Scholem) became involved, a debate to which there is no end in sight.

In 1956 the second event, the Khrushchev report, made comparison inevitable. As early as 1917, Bolshevik communism was known to be a criminal system. But because of the vast influence of the idea, and the power of misinformation and deceit of the movement's organs, this knowledge was not verified. It was denied in good faith by a multitude of honest people.

The Nazi secret involving the destruction of the Jews of Europe was a "simple" secret secured by conventional means: isolated extermination centers, periodic execution of subordinate agents taken from among the victims, the oath binding the exterminating groups, and their relatively small numbers. The Bolshevik secret was more complicated. It also included a military and police element that was simple and conventional. However, this small group was protected by an extremely thick ideological fog in such a way that even if the secrecy protecting the operations of destruction were penetrated, the leak would be sealed up by a general unwillingness to believe the revelation, and the barrier would soon be airtight once again. There were times—for example, between the Spanish war and the victory over Nazism—when knowledge about communism no longer existed beyond its borders, except in the minds of certain individuals. These were usually former communists who had personally experienced it, or disappointed and appalled former leftists who, for the most part, were incapable of passing on their knowledge and often incapable of thinking matters through to the end.

Until 1956 the broken chain of accounts, despite being documented and irrefutable, remained localized and devoid of authority among scholars—the guardians of critical thinking—and among politicians, even those foreign and hostile to the idea of communism. Lending their credibility to such accounts would have required them to undertake a vast revision of their worldviews, because these accounts (the same was true for emerging reports of Nazism) painted an improbable universe, one based on a disconcerting logic, and finding their bearings would have required strenuous effort. Moreover, they did not feel threatened. For example, shortly before 1950 people were scandalized by David Rousset's claim regarding Soviet camps. Sartre had no trouble arguing that, because the concept of a camp is philosophically contradictory to the concept of socialism, these camps could not have existed. During the Kravchenko trial of 1948, Mrs. Buber-Neumann provoked an outcry when she affirmed that remnants of law survived in the German labor camp that did not exist in the Soviet camp where she had been imprisoned before Stalin handed her over to Hitler.

The Khrushchev report did not show the slightest remorse to noncommunist victims of communism. The only true crime of the Stalinist system, the crime that fills it with indignation, was that it carried out large-scale executions of communists who were loyal to the cause. However, even so incomplete a confession introduced a decisive weakness in the brittle ideological structure. According to the secretary general, crimes against noncommunists were really only blameworthy because they handicapped the project and weakened communist power. But after the report, people began asking questions about the crimes committed by communists. The system became the object of general examination and a legitimate suspicion that was now impossible to put a lid on. The investigation grew, yet feebly and intermittently, because communist power lingered on for about thirty more years, a period of time almost as long as the one that separated communism from its birth. Throughout this entire time communist authorities maintained a position of total denial, even while they slowly proceeded to dismantle the camp system. *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974) acted as a battering ram that came crashing into the back door of the lie. But it was only a book: there was still no smoking gun. No one anywhere on earth had seen or touched communist camps except their few survivors. The Cambodian mass graves were the exception. Despite everything, one could say that at the moment of the collapse the secret's seal was broken—although communist revisionism remains much stronger than in the case of Nazism.

THUS, IN THE mid-1960s the horrors of the century, Nazism and communism, were both indicted together. But were they indicted for the same crime? This is the focus of the discussion that follows.

I have divided the discussion into several segments, which is not without its drawbacks because compartmentalizing can cause one to lose sight of the unity of the subject. I will examine the question from the angle of destruction. Indeed, the only elements of Nazism and communism that remain are those which withstood them, such as "dissident" literature. The rest is a field of ruins to excavate and clean up. The destruction was material: living people were converted into corpses. It was moral: honest, rational souls became criminal, insane, and stupid. It was political: the structure of society was violated and then remolded according to the ideological project. Then, leaving the realm of historical analysis, the same investigation must be undertaken from a philosophical and theological point of view. Finally, I will revisit the subject of my speech at the French Academy and describe the work of memory. I will conclude with the uniqueness of the Shoah.