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Culture, Nationalism, and Intercountry Adoption

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Eric Hobsbawm called his history of the twentieth century, “The Age of Extremes,” and with reason. The good news: unprecedented progress in science, technology, medicine and public health; extended life spans and a consequent growth in world population from 1.6 billion to 6 billion; the end of colonialism and a growing recognition of human rights, including the rights of women, children, ethnic and religious minorities and gay people.

On the other side of the historical ledger: a “chain of catastrophe” that circled the globe, encompassing two world wars and reaching to countless additional disasters, including China’s Cultural Revolution, genocide in Rwanda, Vietnam through decades of anti-colonial warfare, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the mass murder of Muslims in Bosnia, Idi Amin’s reign of terror in Uganda, and three generations of Kims inflicting nationwide devastation in North Korea over six decades. The list could be extended.

The unprecedented brutality of the twentieth century does not, of course, mean that individual men and women abruptly declined into novel regions of barbarism. It is rather that circumstances enabled violence on an almost unimaginable scale. Above all, the technology that has brought prosperity and comfort to millions also created the weapons that powered the most sustained and lethal cycle of violence the world has ever seen. Zbigniew Brzezinski has estimated that in the twentieth century over 87,000,000 people, more of them civilians than soldiers, were killed by deliberate human action. Brzezinski describes the politics of the twentieth century, “dominated by the rise of totalitarian movements, as the politics of organized insanity.”

Tens of millions of children were included in that toll of death. It is impossible to document or compute the numbers of children who died or were made orphans or homeless in “the most explosive and destructive” century in human history. Instead of numbers, I can only provide a few examples, from the Second World War, the Great Leap Forward, and the AIDS crisis, which will stand for a myriad others.

This is Tony Judt’s compilation of reports from just one sector of the Second World War, at just one moment.

On its route west the Red Army raped and pillaged (the phrase, for once, is brutally apt) in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Yugoslavia; but German women suffered by far the worst. Between 150,000 and 200,000 “Russian babies” were born in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany in 1945–46, and these figures make no allowance for untold numbers of abortions, as a result of which many women died along with their unwanted fetuses. Many of