

APOSTLES OF ANNIHILATION.

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A CRITIC of Baron Herzen's *Memoirs* calls Nihilism the "Portent of the Nineteenth Century," and the phenomenon of a society for the promotion of reform by assassination has, indeed, only few precedents in the authentic history of the human race.

Human life is protected by the double safeguard of pity and fear. Strong passions may force their way through those barriers, but soon recoil, as from an abuse of their strength, and in its chronic sway over large numbers of our fellowmen the instinct of destruction indicates the influence of altogether abnormal circumstances.

"It would be a mistake," says Hippolyte Taine, "to suppose that the penchant for committing acts of physical violence is a characteristic of the ordinary soldier. The instigators of war are actuated by considerations of political expedience, its conductors by ambition, their subordinates mostly by compulsion, including that of poverty, or by the love of adventure and change."

An ill-paid army can be kept together only by extraordinary appeals to the instinct of approbateness, as in times of national peril, when a country's defenders become its idols; and men who brave the perils of homicide, aggravated by the risk of exile and ostracism, may well be considered exceptional beings of our species.

Like our political pessimists, the followers of the Sheik-ul-Jebel, the "old chief of the mountains," were subject to frenzies of antagonism against the established government of their country, and yet it would be a libel on human nature to doubt that their fury of destruction was a result, rather than a cause, of their anti-social tendencies. The secret of its strength must have a moral significance and was perhaps only partly revealed in the remark ascribed to Aristides at the "Council of the Fleet," that the "re-

sentiment of a cruel wrong is apt to inspire even the weak with passions of portentous power." An explanation of that fact is foreshadowed in the physiological curiosum that the bite of tortured creatures tends to become venomous.

It is nature's expedient for protecting the vanquished and limiting the abuse of a victor's power. Subjugated nations, reduced apparently almost to *caput mortuum*, have more than once rallied with a vengeance, in the extreme dynamic sense of the word. But it should be added that devotion to imperilled social and religious causes has occasionally resulted in similar revolts. The Hussites, in the paroxysms of their religious excitement, hurled back armies in a manner that made monarchs tremble on their thrones. The fanatic leader of the Carmanite rebels had religious grievances to avenge, and the contempt of death evinced by his followers, appears to have reached a *ne-plus-ultra* rarely approached even in the fever of the French Revolution.

"What threats do you suppose could avail to intimidate such men as mine?" he asked the envoy of the Chalif; then summoning two of the sentries: "Stab thyself," he said, "and thou throw thyself from this tower-wall," and was instantly obeyed in both cases.

Thomas Muentzer, the apostle of the Peasants' War, was a religious, as well as political, enthusiast, and the chief of the remorseless Taiping insurgents used to harrangue his men in the style of a Mahdi, rallying the Jehade against the enemies of Heaven.

The remorseless brotherhood known as the Society of Thugs was at first inspired by similar motives. Their founder, the Rishi Aharvadya, was a native of southern Nepaul, at the foot of the Himalayas, where the creed of their ancestors had been worsted in competition with Brahmin and Mohammedan sects, and could avoid suppression only by shifts similar to those of the persecuted Waldenses. Hunted from mountain to mountain, the outlaws tried to conceal the secret of their survival, but were given no breathing-spell and finally evolved that doctrine of homicidal vendetta that made their name a terror to all Hindostan. The avengers soon declared war against the property, as well as the lives, of their oppressors. The temples of their goddess Kâli had been despoiled, and to redress her wrongs, bands of trained man-hunters roamed the country, throttling and burying their victims with the co-operative skill of well-drilled soldiers, and rifling their pockets to recover a portion of what the priests of the serpent-haired deity aught them to consider perverted wealth.

With squadrons of Mohammedan regulators at their heels, the murderous fanatics eventually crossed the border and transferred the scene of their activity to southern India, where they had at first been hospitably received as martyrs of religious persecution.

The tolerance of their new neighbors gave them a fatal advantage in pursuit of their practices. Buddhist pilgrims, Parsee merchants, and European travellers had to expiate the sins of Mussulman bigots, and for many years the British Government stood aloof, trusting to its maxim of letting the numberless sects of the great peninsula settle their own quarrels.

As a consequence, Thuggism became defiant; informers were threatened with death, and the highpriests of the redhanded brotherhood openly celebrated every successful raid of the "avengers," as they called their gangs of masked highway robbers. Mahâkâli ("Kâli the Great") inspired her devotees with oracles, demanding vengeance upon the despisers of her name. The peaceful re-establishment of her worship had, indeed, become more hopeless than ever. It implied sacrifices akin to those of the Moloch temples, and as obnoxious to the champions of civilisation as the practice of cremating widows and assisting religious suicide by the procession of the Juggernaut. The tendencies of the age were offensive to Kâli, and her frowns stimulated the campaign of retribution.

Even thus the "Assassins," or hashish-fuddled followers of the Sheik-ul-Jebel, became enemies of law and order, though their revolt had at first been a measure of self-defence, a protest against intolerable and unremitting persecution. Their vendetta, originally inspired by the cruelty of Mussulman sectarians, was ultimately directed against all dissenters whatever, as well as against all sorts of secular adversaries.

Jennar Pasha, the governor of the Lebanon, finally deputed a hundred dervishes to arouse the natives to a sense of their danger, having found by experience that "the madness of the assassins was arrow-proof," meaning that a campaign of extermination could not be conducted with physical weapons alone.

The managers of the crusade against Thuggism came to a similar conclusion. Sir William Jones, indeed, was obliged to admit that the epidemic of assassination could no longer be mistaken for a self-limited disorder; but, on the other hand, the truculence of such native chiefs as the Sultan of Hyderabad proved to defeat its own purpose. The friends of roasted and skewered bandits posed as martyrs, and often contrived to conciliate the favor of the anti-Mohammedan country-population. Banishment was found a mere

palliative. Emissaries of the exiled leaders returned to rekindle the smouldering embers of fanaticism.

But a remedy was at last found in the persistent agitation against the principles of Kâli-worship and the restless pursuit of actual criminals.

The masses of the country population were induced to join in the hue and cry, and the scattered remnants of the Nepal refugees before long decided to return to the land of their fathers. The climate of the south provinces had become too hot for them.

And history may have to repeat itself in the campaign for the suppression of Nihilism, as it unmistakably repeated itself in the evolution of the strange doctrine that has defied ordinary methods of exorcism. It is a suggestive fact that the European seed-plots of anarchic fanaticism were for centuries the scenes of feudal practices tending to drive discontent to the extreme of a protest against all organised government whatever. A combination of political, social, and religious despotism had turned the scales against the dread of chaos, and made the lot of primitive savages seem a comparatively enviable one.

The regicide mania, too, was encouraged by the peculiar abuses of monarchical institutions and the vulnerable points of their autocratic forms. A mediæval potentate was something more than the figurehead of his state, something more important than a statue on top of a triumphal arch. He was often the very keystone of the structure and his removal could be warranted to result in far-sounding and far-rolling consequences.

"I'm the state," he could say with Louis XIV., in a sense illustrated at his death by a complete change of national politics. The removal of Philip II. would have established the independence of the Netherlands. The death of Frederick Barbarossa gave all southern Europe a breathing spell. The cause of the Servian patriots went under with the hero-chief Skanderbeg. As late as 1760 the removal, by death or capture, of King Frederick would have crushed the budding power of the Prussian monarchy.

Hence one of the two fundamental anachronisms of Nihilism, —its second fallacy being the hopelessness of an attempt to enforce primitive institutions upon our complex social conditions.

For the days of the One-Man power are gone to return no more, and the fall of a political housetop ornament may hardly be felt in the lower stories of the building. The policy of constitutional monarchies can survive an entire dynasty of monarchs.

The chief motive of regicide has, in fact, been largely elim-

inated. One might as well try to stop a steamer by target-practice at a flag that can be re-hoisted at short notice.

But the strange fact remains that the frequency of political assassinations has enormously increased within the last hundred years.

Has representative government missed its purpose? The truth seems to be that the manifestations of hereditary influences cannot be abrogated at short notice. King-murder, though restrained by the dread of barbarous penalties, had become a passion of the latter Middle Ages, and the partial removal of the restraint now brings deep-rooted tendencies to the surface.

Modern rulers, in fact, are expiating the sins of their predecessors. And the epidemic of regicide will perhaps continue to spread; but conspirators, who would refuse to admit the immorality of their plan, may at least consent to recognise its ineffectiveness.