

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre* and a Response to Fascism

Pilote de guerre translates to “War Pilot.” It is sometimes known in English as *Flight to Arras*. The book recounts a reconnaissance mission flown by French Air Force Captain Antoine de Saint-Exupéry over and behind the German lines during the quick and crushing defeat of the French in the Spring of 1940. Saint-Exupéry, or St-Ex as he was known, was already a famous author and a pilot in France before the war, who, at the war’s outbreak, had volunteered for the French air force. His most famous work in the English-speaking world, and the one which we will almost certainly know, is *The Little Prince*, written during the war, after the fall of France.

But before the *Little Prince* was written, moving back to the rout of the Spring of ‘40, in fact just before the takeoff for the mission which constitutes the narrative of *Pilote de Guerre*, we find St-Ex casually remarking to one of his friends “Oh, we’ll see about this or that after the war”, to which his comrade replies “You don’t really expect to be alive after the war, do you?” And in fact, St-Ex did not survive the war ; he disappeared during a mission in 1944. He saw the defeat of France by fascism ; he did not live to see the liberation of France and the defeat of Nazism.

But even before his take-off in the spring of ‘40, he was under no illusion ; St-Ex already knew that France was losing, and would lose : he says that the French armed forces are “in full retreat, that it was a full-on disaster.”

Personally, as well, he knew that he probably wouldn’t live. He describes the mission which constitutes the narrative of the book as a “sacrifice mission” and notes that his squadron had already lost 17 out 23 of their aircraft with their crews in three weeks. He asks himself for what is it that he will die, asking “What good is it to engage my life in this avalanche?” And why would one throw oneself into a battle already lost, like, as St-Ex says, “one would throw glasses of water at a forest fire?”

Before his take-off in the Spring of 1940, it must have seemed to St-Ex, to all of France, and to the whole world, that the fascism had won – it must have seemed that that after decades of expansion, fascism had defeated the liberal democracy which was the fruit of the centuries of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and French Revolutionary liberal democracy. Concluding sentence.



The German General Staff considers the white cliffs of Dover, July 1940.

Indeed, the German General staff stood looking west over the Channel at England only weeks after. Fascism – an international fascist movement – had been victorious in Spain in 1936. Fascism, with the Nazis, had firm control over Germany and the apparent support of the German people. They had Anschluss't Austria, seized the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia, taken the western half of Poland, allied with Finland, defeated France, Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Holland, assured themselves of the neutrality and eventual alliance of fascist Bulgaria, of the fascist Iron Guard of Romania, and fascist Hungary was moving on Transylvania, Monrovia and Slovakia. Italian fascism was moving in North and East Africa and Greece. Other than neutral Portugal, Switzerland, and Sweden, all of Europe was fascist.

It must have seemed a crushing defeat. Only the British Isles, with the disarmed British army and a smattering of Frenchmen, Poles, and Belgians remained after having fled Dunkirk. The French had bled themselves white to allow the escape – 90,000 Frenchmen paid with their lives in six weeks in the spring of '40, and including the wounded, there were almost 300,000 casualties. That is more than 50,000 per week, excluding those taken prisoner, of which there were 1.8 million men by the end of July, three months after the offensive began. Between casualties and prisoners, that was over 2 million men. The Canadians and Australians had only begun to mobilise. The United States were doing the same thing they'd done in the First War -- selling war goods to both sides while declaring neutrality. The Soviet Union had a non-aggression pact with the Axis. Where was hope? Why continue to fight when defeat appeared certain? Any lucid

man would ask himself this question, and as Saint-Ex is taking off, he explains that his *Pilote de Guerre* is the result of himself “Trying to understand why I must die.”

It is my contention that St-Ex faced *the* modern problem : how to respond to fascism. And this is the problem which we face today, right here and right now, as well ; . The days are gone when we can pretend that we defeated fascism in 1945. We may have defeated German Nazism, but fascism is bigger than just the Nazis.



American neo-Nazis chant “Jews will not replace us”
at the Unite the Right rally in Virginia, 2017.

What my research has taught me is that that the XXth century was an entire century of continuous world war. This is perhaps not a new idea ; more people died in war in the XXth Century than ever in the history of man, but I also assert that what we face is a fascist attack : I contend that we have faced a continuous fascist war of over 100 years, which comes and goes in waves, but never has never stopped.

I should briefly establish my claim, because I know that many will not accept it. In fact I have two different claims :

- 1) First, that there has been a continuous war for about 125 years – a war of varying intensity, but a state of war nevertheless -- and
- 2) secondly, that this war is a fascist attack.

Now, it would take a book to firmly make my case, but briefly, as an example, we all remember that at the end of what we now call the First War the

French General Foch said of the Treaty of Versailles “It is not a peace, it’s a cease-fire for twenty years.” And indeed the war did not stop ; the Americans, English, French, and Canadians took soldiers directly from the Western Front, sailed them straight to Vladivostok and Archangel and attacked the Soviet Union. The French occupied the Rhineland in 1923, thus an attack on Germany only five years after the armistice. And overt and widespread fascism was on the rise : I quote researcher Kevin Passmore : “...by 1925 at least 45 groups in several countries called themselves Fascist.” Ten years later, in 1936, the Wehrmacht re-occupied the Rhineland, less than 20 years after the armistice, and in Spain, the fascist Franco and International fascism openly attacked – with the direct military action of Italy and Germany — and won. In fact, there was no peace in the so-called “Between the wars” ; there were proxy wars, repositioning of forces, a frightening growth and consolidation of fascist power, and a new generation of boys grew old enough to become cannon-fodder.

This is just one example, but I contend that WWI, WWII, WWIII, are misnomers, which show only the extreme heights of violence, spasms of industrial murder, but these so-called world wars have not been, are *not* interspersed with peace, any more than we I the US of A can claim to be at peace now, even though we are not in an official “state of war.” The official parlance of the US ruling class, the Department of Defense and the security apparatus is that we are involved in various “low intensity conflicts”, “regime-change operations”, and “police actions” – but it is Int’l and endless war nonetheless.

This brings me to my second claim, that the more-than-a-century of war which we face is fascist.

St-Ex knew that the rise of fascism was more than just a French, or even a European challenge – it is global in its threat, for as he said, “We fight in the name of a common cause. The freedom, not just of France, but of the whole world is at stake.” This is our challenge, and St-Ex shows us how to respond.

It is our challenge, and it is fearful, but the first thing which we must do is to frankly acknowledge the threat which we face. And yes, it is fearful. We wish that we could avoid it, and we are tempted to psychological denial. How could it happen here? How can it be true? How do we know it’s really fascism? We hope it isn’t, because if it’s not really fascism, maybe this social movement can be appeased, or solved easily, or maybe it will just go away. But we also know that fascism, if it is really fascism, doesn’t just go away, and our modern history assures us that the question is dangerously critical.

Well, fair enough : is it Fascism? Or is that word too extreme? Outlandish? A panicked accusation? Some accuse Trump of fascism, but is he one? Or is 'fascism' just a word thrown out there to attack Trump and his ilk, like Trump and Fox News throw out the words 'communist and socialist and terrorist' -- just meaningless accusations intended to create fear?

So then the question might become, "How do we define Fascism?" so that we can be sure of the threat which we face. Because if we were sure, as a people, as a society, that we were facing such a threat, we would have broad consensus to mobilise forces to combat it. Then should there be some work defining what fascism is? No doubt an important task for researchers and intellectual pursuit : for example, we here at this conference.

But the question then becomes : Can it be done? Can we define fascism so that we might hope to point it out clearly? It is not easy ; my research has taught me that it is surprisingly difficult, in fact. Fascism is cynical ; it will assume whatever persona best suits its particular rhetorical situation. And one of the trickiest things about fascism is trying to point it out clearly to those who are, psychologically, tempted to deny it. And while liberals wring their hands and closely discuss terms, fascism acts. Well, it is important to understand, so briefly, let's give it a try.

This conversation has been had before. Contemporary to St-Ex and focussing on the same noun, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) defined Fascism as "the growth of private power to the point where it becomes stronger than the state itself; ownership of government by ...any private power" (Qt'd in Zinn xxx) and Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini, Il Duce, who was proud to bear the name fascist, defined it in similar terms, saying "Fascism should be called corporatism as it is a merge of state and corporate power."

These definitions are no doubt true, clearly indicating fascism as at least partly a reaction to the crises in modern capitalism, but do such economic and/or Marxist definitions really explain fascism? Was the Holocaust directly motivated by a consolidation of corporate power? For the open hatred of a demonised Other is central to fascism. The definitions of FDR and Il Duce don't imply anything of racism.

As well, fascism always points to a glorious mythological past as a utopian goal for the people – a Third Reich that would re-unite the Germanic peoples and through the sword acquire *lebensraum* for a thousand years of Aryan ascendancy,

or the re-establishment of a new Roman Empire for the Italians, or an America made great again. This Utopia always has to be established by a self-justifying military and police power which will racially purify through violence and through eradication of the Other.

Again, in the Marxist definitions of fascism proposed by FDR or Il Duce, there is nothing of a mythological past nor of a Utopia which will be the end of history. But looking at our modern history shows that these idols are present in fascism and central to the propaganda justifying fascism to the masses.

Now, we have not plumbed the depths of the definition which we seek, but we have sketched it briefly ; what we see is that during acute crises in capitalism, private power supplants the public will and welfare, (as FDR and Il Duce explain), and this is the cause, but that is only the beginning. The people, who are in serious financial and material distress, are led astray by politicians or leaders who demonise minorities, both racial minorities and other vulnerable groups, and these cynical leaders use fear-mongering to blame these minorities for the problems which the people are suffering. The people are offered the vision of a mythological golden age, an idolised racial identity in which they can take some pride, giving them a false idealised identity. The race is assured that those golden days can be had again, if only the threatening and demonised Other is eradicated, which both calls for and justifies a brutal attack aiming for genocide.

Fascism is not an aberration – it is one of the consequences of our capitalist age. It is, as Passmore says, “the crisis of our age.” History has moved to place us here. Where our binary perception of the world, the centuries of racist and violent socialisation which we in the West have undergone through the age of Colonialism, the material threats and crises late-stage capitalism lead us to a fear, an existential anxiety, which becomes a violent hatred of an Other upon whom we project evil, which results in the disdainful, immoral, hyper-militaristic dystopia which is Fascism. It is the problem of the modern age. In short, fascism is one of the fruits of modernity.

St-Ex knew this before we were born, *teaching taught* us that fascism is “the fundamental problem of our time...[implicating] the meaning and purpose of humanity...moving toward the blackest time in the history of the world,” – paying for it with his life?

Voilà, we've briefly sketched a definition of fascism. As academics, a privileged class, we can sagely nod our heads and carefully clarify terms. And it is important work. But does our admittedly vague and complex definition help us to call for action? To clearly point out the threat we face to our fellow countrymen, to the masses? Not really; it's too esoteric.

And what about the masses, the majority of our population? the plain-old folk, working people? In times of capitalist crisis, in economic distress, they feel pressure ; they feel threatened. Capitalist propaganda and corporate marketing tell them that they deserve to conspicuously consume to enjoy the good life, but in their poverty and debt, they can't, so they feel frustrated. Coupled with that, the Protestant work ethic tells them that they should work their way out of it, that they should pull themselves up by their boot-straps, while at the same time their unemployment or under-paid work threatens them with poverty, threatens to leave them behind. This (economic?) pressure / stress threatens them existentially – in how they perceive themselves, who and what they are, in their being, in their self-identity. Sociology tells us what unemployment does, the effects : the shame, frustration and desperation, the depression, leading too often to alcohol or drug abuse, encouraging petty crime -- especially in Western men, who have been socialised to compete and succeed, to provide. The long-term unemployed and poor feel that they've failed at man-hood.

They feel anxiety, but they largely lack the historical and sociological paradigm – which we have as academics – to articulate their own situation. They know that they are threatened, but they can't really define the threat. This anxiety, coupled with Western racism, makes many of the working classes and poor (masses?) vulnerable to the demagoguery of fascists pointing to a demonised Other as the cause of the ill-defined pressure they feel.

And on top of that, to make it even harder, here Saint-Ex teaches us another thing : that the reason, the logic, the historical knowledge which we have just used to sketch our definition, and which we prize so much, cannot be used to help us identify the threat – in fact, Fascism is able to twist logic and history to its own justification.

And here Saint-Ex shows wisdom and compassion – *enabling us to avoid the binary us vs them perception of the world which fascism pursues to a murderous extreme* -- : as he is literally taking off to fight and risk his life against Fascism, he tells us that we must “seek to understand [them] before we judge.”

The masses – all of the working poor, the unemployed, those who have been dispossessed and then blamed for their poverty, all those who experience the shame and fear of poverty, and who have internalised their own oppression, they are us. They are just men and women ; they are our folks. And as Saint-Ex tells us, “All of them feel, more or less confusedly, the need to become.” He continues, that we all long to be “linked to our brothers in a common goal which is grander than each of us.” French existentialism explains.

And here St-Ex explains the attraction of fascism : for the unemployed and hopeless mass of men, the ancient role of warrior offers a path, and is presented as a way to manhood, self-respect, and community. Saint-Ex explains that : “dressed in uniforms, they sing their songs and break bread together.” And here is a point which Saint-Ex teaches us, and we would make a mistake in not realising : “A fascist troop is, after all, a community of men.” Fascists find their identity and self-worth in pursuing a transcendent goal bound to their community, and, because as Saint-Ex says “The truth for a man is that which makes a man out of him”, fascism becomes their truth.

They are promised that if they follow the warrior’s ethic, they will be authentic men, warriors, patriots. Albert Camus, another Frenchman who, like Saint-Ex, saw and wrestled with the defeat of France by the Fascists, explains the warrior’s ethic as “Honour lies in obedience, and so honour [in fascism] becomes servitude.” This obedience implies that “When the whole world is military, *the crime is not to kill* if the orders demand it (N.B. italics are mine xx).

Again, the crime is not to kill – so therefore to kill becomes virtue. If we accept the premises, the syllogism appears valid. The argument seems to hold up. Saint-Ex shows us that, surprisingly, reason and logic lead to murder. Virtue and the warrior’s code of honour led to the Holocaust.

French poet Valery explained that it was the virtue of the German people that made them such dangerous adversaries.

But St-Ex shows us the way. He doesn’t let himself be caught up in semantics, a logic, a reason which is inadequate to the challenge which we see before us. By their fruits shall ye know them. The first step, St-Ex shows us, is to clearly face the reality of the terrifying threat which is coming. What are the fruits?

But judge not by intelligence, but the connaitre of the spirit. St-Ex tells us “Man is governed by the spirit. I am worth that which my gods are worth.” pp.19

Camus : “Mépris – disdain or contempt” Conditions leading to disdain contribute to fascism quote. And what works against disdain works against fascism. quote.

The attraction. And I do not use the word Idol lightly – Fascism is an idolatry. The Utopian destiny of the race is conceived as a transcendent end, the ultimate end, subsuming the individual and dictating morals.

Saint-Ex recognises this, describing the idols the carnivorous gods – pp.19

When I was young, I always looked up to my Grandpa. My Grandpa was a farm boy and a horseman – a working man. My Grandpa dropped out of school young and worked his way through the depression. Soon after that, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy, and fought the Battle of the North Atlantic on board a corvette. In fact, he was fighting allied to St. Ex. His knowledge of fascism was not theoretical. Now, I asked my Grandpa a few times how you could know if you were looking at fascism. He never wanted to talk about it a lot, and I don't know if it was because he'd already been through the war, and won it, and now just wanted to live out the rest of his life, or whether it was because he had a hard time putting his finger on it, which is probably moreso the case. But when I could get him to talk about it, he spoke of three things :

firstly, police brutality against minorities.

Secondly, night-time home raids.

Thirdly, when minority groups start to get rounded up and put into camps.

He told me that when you see these things, that is fascism. He was pointing to the fruits, the acts – not the theory of academics. And he acted.

-- Call to action. The Hero's Journey – to what end? And we are confronted with having to respond to it ourselves. How will we do it? St-Ex taught us that we must work to “create the conditions” for “Victory is a fruit of love.”

We cannot remain neutral ; as Saint-Exupéry taught us, taking off on that mission, the choice lies before us “...either to accept being Hitler's slave – or to reject him entirely, taking all the risks inherent in this refusal.” And Saint-Ex makes no bones about it : “for the military, it is the acceptance of death, pure and simple.”

Called to act : St-Ex, as he takes off, tells us “What saves us is to take a step – and then another step.” He continues “taking off on my mission, I'm not thinking

about the struggle of the West against Fascism. I'm concerned with immediate details...I do my job.... The fight against fascism becomes, on the scale of my acts, the turning of knobs and twisting of levers, the adjustment of valves" (Pilote). St-Ex shows us that our day-to-day acts and action, however small = meaningful response. Our day-to-day actions to create the conditions for freedom and human dignity & are meaningful and authentic responses. What Jeffersonian democracy calls "republican virtues" : civic engagement, quiet and patient work, every act of kindness, informed by a spirit of unity.

A conclusion?

So we are called to act. As academics, our thoughtful attendance at this conference becomes meaningful if we can take what we will have learnt and apply it to the world in accordance with the vision of the spirit. We are seated upon the shoulders of giants, engaged in the work of Socrates, and we find ourselves in a privileged position of being able to work to create the conditions for freedom, dignity,

We are privileged to be in positions where we are granted a rhetorical voice, engaged in the work of Socrates, and day by day, class by class, we can work to create the conditions.... Those of us in this room may not see the victory ; let us pray that we do not see the defeat, but even if we do see the defeat – as St-Ex did, for he saw the crushing defeat -- not to surrender to despite.

In all humility, we cannot say what victory would even look like : the blind man metaphore. With no guarantee of victory that we will see, but every action against disdain creates the conditions for human freedom & dignity, is an act against fascism, a small victory. Cathedral metaphore? Genesis is not yet finished/accomplished.

The question is "Who are we?" -- the existential question, the universal question. And specific to us of the Modern age, the question presents itself through fascism.

Genesis is not yet

*The attraction? **Logos** power vs Justice. What will be our end?*

It can't be avoided L'élève a l'école qui fait semblant d'être malade.