

# Marx: His Death & Resurrection

By Louis J. Halle

ALL GREAT MEN must be viewed in two distinct aspects. There is the limited aspect in which they are great, and there is the other aspect in which they are ordinary human beings like the rest of us. The greatness of most truly great men resides in some quality of vision that on occasion exalts them, and that exalts those to whom it is communicated. No great man, however, lives constantly on the level of his vision. Like the rest of us, in their daily lives all are largely preoccupied with petty concerns; they are prone to be moved by jealousy or bad temper, to say foolish things, to act meanly, and to behave inconsiderately toward those who are close to them.

Our need for heroes to worship, however, generally makes us disregard or deny what is ordinary in a great man. For the man as he was we substitute, sometimes while he is still alive, a legend. Even while Gandhi, for example, was still alive, there was a legendary Gandhi different from the real one: for the real Gandhi was an advocate of the use of violence when, as it seemed to him, the occasion allowed of no good alternative, while the legendary Gandhi is an absolute pacifist. The real Gandhi advocated economic policies or practices that had no relevance to the requirements of reality, or offered such impractical advice as that all the Jews under Hitler should commit suicide, while the legendary Gandhi is perfect in understanding and counsel.

The disparity between legend and reality seems to me greater in the case of Karl Marx than in that of any other modern figure. In legend he is an infallible prophet, basing his prophecies on an empirical science unknown before him. But one has only to read his writings to see for oneself that, in addition to being romantic rather than empirical or scientific, the whole body of prediction they contain was long ago proved wrong by the course history actually took. (I assume that fewer and fewer persons still believe that the Russian *coup d'état* of October 1917 bore any resemblance to the Revolution predicted in *The Communist Manifesto*, or that what followed was a "dictatorship

of the proletariat.") This presents a full contrast to the predictions of his contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville, which have in fact been borne out; yet de Tocqueville, who never acquired a legendary persona, has no reputation as a prophet remotely comparable to that of Marx.

For years I have had a frustrated curiosity about Karl Marx as a human being, a curiosity left totally unsatisfied by such biographies as that of Franz Mehring, which depict Marx as if he were God the Father, perfect in his wisdom, infallible in his utterance, but persecuted throughout his life on earth as God the Son had been persecuted. One finds nothing about his ordinary day-to-day life, since eating, sleeping, and the involvements of family living are not for gods.

At last, however, I have found a biography that deals with the human Marx and, in fact, goes to the other extreme from Mehring's. Robert Payne's *Marx*<sup>1</sup> concentrates on his daily life, with special emphasis on such activities as pub-crawling in London, drunken binges, and whatever else may serve to diminish the man and discredit the legend. It is a hostile biography, in some ways petty, meretricious, and unscholarly, but I found it satisfying in a way that I daresay Mr. Payne would not have expected. To the extent that it makes Marx human it provides grounds for viewing him with the compassion proper to all us pitiful mortals, caught up as we all are in the tragedy of life.

I ADMIT THAT my own attitude toward Marx, both as a person and as a writer, has always been hostile. I have credited him with an epic albeit fictional vision of history,<sup>2</sup> but I have always abhorred the style of writing that represents the main Marxist tradition and has its origin in Marx's own work: the *ex-cathedra* dogmatism, the overstatement, the crude vituperation, and the screaming hatred that dominates so much of it. Marx appears to have had no love for his fellow men, no compassion, no humanitarianism, and little concern for the sufferings of anyone but himself. Men did not exist for him as individual human beings of flesh and blood but as abstract social classes or statistics. His entire career was nominally dedicated to the working class, yet he showed no

<sup>1</sup> Robert Payne, *Marx* (W. H. Allen, 70s.).

<sup>2</sup> See my article, "Marx's Religious Drama" in *ENCOUNTER*, October 1965.

interest in working men and had virtually no contact with them. His "Proletariat" was simply an epic hero of the imagination. He represented the German philosophical tradition in which grandiose abstractions take the place of existential realities, and are even dealt with as if they were actual persons possessed of mind and will. The extremism of Marx, represented as well by the line of Marxist tradition that passes through Lenin, has always been extraordinarily callous to the sufferings of real human beings; and there is no doubt that Marx, himself, occasionally revelled in the dream of wholesale massacres, with blood flowing in the streets. One is tempted to believe, uncharitably, that his consistent opposition to improving the lot of the workers by progressive reforms, rather than by violent revolution, had at least some of its roots in this dream. Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung, although not representing Marx's thinking in other respects, have been representative of him in the same lack of concern for real people, in their disposition to cure the evils of society by subjecting actual flesh-and-blood to suffering and death on a scale that no one else in history except Hitler has ever approached. All this, as I say, has always made Marx's writings, and those of his successors, repulsive to me.

There was also the fact that Marx's first book, *On the Jewish Question*, had been an anti-Semitic polemic in which he poured his vituperation over the people (again, regarded as a class or collectivity) from whom he had himself sprung, but from whom he dissociated himself with the hatred that the book manifests. It is extraordinary how those who have cultivated the Marxian legend have succeeded in keeping the existence or nature of this book quiet, or in explaining it away by pretending that he was using the terms "Jew" and "Judaism" in a metaphorical sense only.

I admit, as well, that my curiosity about Marx's personal life was not the expression of a favourable disposition. I could not understand how a man could allow his wife and children to live in the most humiliating misery, his children dying and his wife suffering mental and physical agonies for want of proper medical care, rather than subject himself to the normal discipline of working to support his family. Did he never feel a twinge of conscience over this? One could hardly admire the way he sponged all his life on his friends and relatives, even exploiting their labour, as when he got Engels, a man who was busy as he was not, to write many of the columns for *The New York Tribune* that appeared under Marx's name and for which he pocketed the pay. A puritan streak in my nature and inheritance (which, like grey hair, begins to show itself with age) aroused

in me incredulity, even more than disapproval, of a life so lived.

IT IS A PARADOX that the reading of the Payne biography has had the effect of softening my standing hostility toward Marx. This is partly because Payne is himself so unfair and so un-pitying in his treatment of what is, after all, a long record of human suffering that the reader at last tends to rebel against the writer and to make compensating judgments.

One example will suffice. It is virtually beyond doubt that Marx was the father of Helene Demuth's illegitimate son. Helene Demuth had been a servant girl in the household of Marx's father-in-law, the Baron von Westphalen. When Marx's wife, Jenny, was expecting her second child, the Baroness had sent Lenchen, as she was called, to help out, and Lenchen had remained with the Marxes for the rest of their lives. There is not a wisp of evidence to indicate the circumstances in which Marx fathered her child. Nevertheless, on page 260 Mr. Payne allows himself to speculate on whether it was a case of seduction or rape, suggesting that it was most likely the latter, and by page 266 he is referring to the "rape" as if the matter were settled.

Now the fact is that at this period Karl and Jenny Marx, Lenchen, and the three Marx children were all living together in two rooms in Soho, a general-purpose room and a "tiny bedroom." They had no bathroom and they had to go downstairs to the common rooming-house toilet. Since the general-purpose room was also Marx's study, where he habitually worked through a large part of the night, one wonders where Lenchen could have slept. In any case, the circumstances could not have permitted what most of us would consider the normal requirements of privacy. Presumably it was hardly practicable for the members of the household even to dress and undress in private. Marx was still a young man, his wife was four years older than he, bedridden with illness much of the time, afraid of becoming pregnant, and sometimes away from London for weeks at a stretch. Lenchen was young and pretty. Various persons are bound to react differently to the event in question, but my own reaction is: what else could one expect? Marx and Lenchen were living together in the closest quarters during long periods when Mrs. Marx was away. Surely the circumstances call for a compassionate attitude, not for an unsupported accusation of rape! The biographer sometimes seems as lacking in human understanding as ever his subject was. So it is that his hostile animus has the effect of arousing sympathy for his subject even in a reader whose basic disposition is hostile.

THE STATEMENT THAT my own hostility was softened by reading the biography must be qualified. For the young Marx I feel no sympathy. From his university days he appears to have combined a monumental intellectual arrogance with a disposition to admire whatever was Satanic—to see himself, in fact, as another Satan destroying the hated creation of his celestial opponent, which he looked forward to seeing washed away in its own blood. His consequent destructive animus does not appear to have been devoid of what is the corrupting element in almost all revolutionaries, the desire for personal power. Rather than join the established society, earning his bread and making his career in it, he would overthrow it, and in the vaguely imagined society that he would erect on its ruins he would be top man.

Until Marx was well into middle-age he generally expected the Revolution he predicted to occur imminently. Perhaps he had to believe this, for it was the entire justification of what was otherwise simply a self-indulgent way of life that kept his family in destitution. He was repeatedly assuring himself and his associates that any day now the Revolution would come which would vindicate him and, one surmises, elevate him to his rightful place as the hero of the world.

This is familiar and plausible to one who remembers the intellectual circles of New York in the 1930s, when a standard conversational phrase in serious use was: "Come the Revolution. . . ." The commonly accepted belief, after the Great Depression began, was that what had happened in Russia in 1917 was about to happen in the United States and, indeed, all over the world. I knew many typical intellectuals of the time well enough to know that, whether consciously or unconsciously, their active support of the Communist line was not disinterested. They were making a place for themselves on the band-wagon of history. Some of them were manoeuvring actively so that, "come the Revolution," they would find themselves in positions similar to those of Lenin and his associates after October 1917—positions from which they would watch us others, who had not had the sense to see what was coming, passing through the streets in the equivalent of tumblers on our way to some modern version of the guillotine. Remembering all this, I think I understand Marx's mind through these years of his life better than I would otherwise, but without sympathy.

Engels, whose name is indissolubly linked with that of Marx, also arouses no sympathy in me. He rose in the management and at last became part owner of his father's textile factory in Manchester. I can find no evidence that he ever

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took any interest in the condition of the workers in that factory. What occupied a good part of his personal life was pretty women, good food and wines, fox-hunting, and other amenities of a *bon-vivant's* life; and when he died in 1895 he left a personal estate worth £25,267—presumably representing his appropriation of the “surplus value” produced by the labour he exploited. He too lived most of his life in a position to make a satisfactory adjustment to the Revolution when and if it came, although in his later years he tended to become cynical about the whole Marxist movement, even going so far as to denigrate the doctrine of “historical materialism” on which it was based.

GIVEN THE PERSONAL ATTITUDE I have set forth here, I might have been expected to be among the most uncritical readers of the Payne biography. Nevertheless, there comes a time in the tale of Marx's life, even as related by a hostile biographer, when one's compassion begins to be stirred. Out of the *hubris* of a very young man, he had committed himself to an undisciplined and irresponsible career, based on the false premise that he had it within his power to turn the world upside-down. But by the time he was in his mid-fifties and the premise had been reduced to a pipe-dream it was too late for him to choose another direction. He had for so long lived a life of doing as he pleased, within the limits of such shake-downs as he could subject Engels and others to, that he had at last become genuinely unemployable. In fact, he was gradually becoming incapable of any work at all. It is true that in his old age he was finally put on a comfortable pension by Engels; but by then he was suffering from painful ailments too unpleasant to think about, his wife who had been born to the elegant life of the German aristocracy had been simply burned out by the years of horror, during which for long periods she had wondered how she could survive from day to day. Of their six children three, including the only two boys, had died. The tale of human suffering in the life of this family builds up until at last any faults in those who suffer become irrelevant. Beyond a certain point it would be both pharisaical and cruel to suggest that such agony was deserved. What does it matter, any longer, that the young Marx had thought he had the world by the tail, and had looked forward to the torment he would inflict on it? The prematurely old Marx, although he still cultivates hatred and arrogant language, is essentially a broken man. The hope of revolution and personal power is gone, and all he has left to feed his self-esteem is a rare mention of himself in a newspaper.

As for Johanna Bertha Julie Jenny Marx, *née*

von Westphalen, history can provide no greater example of a woman's dedication to the man to whom she has given her life. Here no one could make a case that she deserved the horror of those thirty-eight years of marriage. One can only hope, if one wishes to believe in some ultimate justice, that there were compensations in those inner recesses of the mind to which no outsider can ever penetrate.

The whole tale, as Mr. Payne tells it, ends at last like the final scene of *Hamlet* with death piled on death. The aged Jenny, who has been declining throughout all the years of her marriage, dies with her hand in her husband's, her last words, spoken in English, being: “My strength is broken. . . .” The old man lasts for another fourteen months, cared for by his daughter Eleanor, trying to recover his health by going from one resort or watering place to another, but stricken by news of his favourite daughter's death. Then one day, in his London house, Lenchen “went upstairs to see him and returned two minutes later. ‘Come up,’ she said. ‘He is half asleep.’” Eleanor, Lenchen, and Engels “then went to the bedroom and found him sitting in his armchair. He was dead at the age of sixty-five.”

The next to die, in the ugliness and agony of a painful ailment, is Lenchen, now an old woman who had moved into Engels' household after Marx's death. “We were the last two of the pre-1848 old guard,” Engels wrote to his friend Friedrich Sorge. He, himself, was to die a few years later of cancer of the throat.

It remains to mention only that each of the two surviving daughters, Laura and Eleanor, after long years of unhappiness and hopes that all came to nothing, ended her life by suicide.

The history of the House of Marx, taking its departure from the *hubris* of the young Karl, matches that of the House of Atreus.

THE EPILOGUE is well known. Karl Marx never became a great public figure in his life-time, as he had expected he would; and in the end, after years of retirement and inactivity, he was a pitiful old man who had been all but forgotten. However, the alienated intellectuals of the succeeding generation would feel the need of a Prophet of the Industrial Age to take the place of the Christ, born into a pastoral society, who had come to seem irrelevant in the circumstances of the new times. So when Engels, who had no illusions about Marx's limitations, set out to create a legendary Marx the conditions were propitious. Marx had always spoken in the voice of prophecy, as if he had been Jehovah handing down the Tablets of the Law, and this counted where the question of

whether the prophecies had been confirmed by the course of history did not. By contrast with Marx, de Tocqueville had prophesied truly, but because he had not presented himself as if speaking out of the thunder, and because his vision had no quality of epic drama, he had no qualifications for the role.

Marx's burial was postponed in order to enable any following on the Continent to come to England for it; but in the end there were only eleven persons who attended the funeral, six of them members of the immediate family, if one includes Engels as an honorary member. Engels began his funeral oration to the other ten with the words: "On March 14, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think." So the legend was launched. After Marx's death he was born again, this time as another Mahomet—except that, unlike Mahomet, he was a Prophet without a God.

By a caprice of history that the real Marx did not live to see, and that Engels viewed with becoming irony, the Prophet needed by the new Industrial Age was the unhappy old man whose life had been a failure and to whose graveside only eleven mourners could be gathered. All history is tragic as well as ironic; and great men, even though we know they are not good men, may still be deserving of compassion.

## Pilot in a Storm

**Eshkol of Israel. The Man and the Nation.**  
By TERENCE PRITTE. *Museum Press.* £2.

AT FIRST SIGHT Levi Eshkol, the Israeli Prime Minister who died in February of this year, is not a promising subject for biography, and any book which depicts his life and times is in danger of being overwhelmed by the times at the expense of the life. He was a self-effacing man and his character was in marked contrast to that of his predecessors. From the end of the 19th century to 1963 the Zionist, and later Israeli leadership had been intensely dramatic. Herzl, Weizmann, Ben-Gurion were men of massive and arresting personality, impressive orators, men who played and were seen to play great roles on the stage of the political world.

Eshkol came as an anti-climax. He was no orator and he was incapable of a theatrical gesture. His arrival as Prime Minister in succession to Ben-Gurion has been compared to

that of Clement Attlee in succession to Winston Churchill and of Truman in place of the flamboyant Roosevelt. The comparison is apt in both cases. Those who underestimated him found that they had made a costly mistake. He had to stand up to challenges as grave as any of those which confronted any of his predecessors, and his performance proved him their equal.

This "Truman element" in the story of Eshkol is extremely well brought out by Mr. Terence Prittie in a book which, in spite of some defects, is a remarkably well-studied and reliable guide to the complex story of modern Jewish history in Israel.

Let me get rid of what I feel to be the defects now, rather than leave mention of them to the end in scorpion fashion. I see two kinds of fault: a few (very few) gross errors of fact, and the less easily defined weakness of needless bias. Of the first kind the faults seem to be due to occasional moments of hurried and unconsidered writing. For example:

In 1906 Weizmann had an hour's talk with Arthur Balfour in Manchester, a meeting which has, even in retrospect, attracted curiously little attention, since Balfour had been made Prime Minister only a year before.

If a story—a very good one it is too—has been repeated once too often rather than the opposite it is the tale of this justly celebrated meeting. I fancy that an account of it was first published by Mrs. Dugdale in her life of Balfour. Weizmann repeated it in his own autobiography, and it is to be found in many other places. Among Jews it is as familiar as the tale of Alfred and the cakes among Englishmen. When I heard someone begin to tell it in an after-dinner speech some twelve years ago, I noticed anxious looks as diners signalled to each other: "Oh Lord, not that one again!" Balfour became Prime Minister on Lord Salisbury's retirement in July 1902, as a glance at the *D.N.B.* could tell the laxest of researchers.

Of the Mufti of Jerusalem Mr. Prittie says on page 97:

Haj Amin Husseini openly espoused the Nazi cause. He ensconced himself in Baghdad for much of the war and paid frequent visits to Germany for talks with Hitler and his ministers.

This picture of the Mufti week-ending with the *Führer* from Baghdad (officially British-allied) is wholly unreal. His war-time career falls into two distinct periods: in exile from Palestine, first in the Lebanon, after in Baghdad; then after he had escaped internment on the collapse of Rashid Ali's rebellion and made his way to Germany in 1941, he lived in Berlin and Nazi-