

Francis Ambrose Ridley

The Assassins

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Foreword to Second Edition

The reissue of this book on the fiftieth anniversary of its appearance, which was also the year of the proclamation of the Fourth International,¹ could not be more timely. The last twenty years have seen the return of assassination as a political instrument in such diverse countries and situations as Great Britain, Argentina, Ireland, Spain, the United States, Egypt and the Lebanon, an omen of deeper disturbances to come. These have come from right across the political spectrum, from radical nationalists to the far right. The new pattern is strongly reminiscent of the old, not least in Iran, the Assassins' homeland, whose rulers have executed spectacular political murders of opponents over considerable distances. Resurgent Shi'ism has unleashed its pent-up energies against the world of Sunni Islam as well as the West, while subjecting the gentle Baha'is to the vilest of persecutions at home.

But why should we reprint this book when so much intensive research has been carried out since? It contains none of the first-hand acquaintance with Assassin ideas of Hodgson's book,² nor the broad command of sources demonstrated by Professor Lewis.³ Franzius supplies much more detailed information on the later history of the sect in the east,⁴ and as a popular account Burman's work is far more lightly written.⁵

So what is its value to us?

To start with, it is written with an awareness of the broad rhythms of history that only Marxism can provide. The interest of the British Left in the medieval history of Islam has never been marked, largely limited to books on Ibn Khaldun and Rodinson's superb Mohammed,⁶ both of them translations. Ridley places the traditions of assassination in a given social and political context, and firmly links them to a dying civilisation. He shows clearly, drawing upon numerous examples, how movements of political and social revolt in a society dominated by religion, in which church and state are one, must of necessity take the form of religious sectarianism. Secondly, he writes from a humanist and secularist point of view, refreshingly free of cant. The history of colonial revolt since the Second World War should at least have told us that yesterday's terrorist becomes tomorrow's freedom fighter if his cause succeeds, just as Engels made plain that the organisation of systematic terror is the state apparatus itself. But Ridley goes much deeper when he shows that individual terror is historically the weapon of the weaker side, the defence of the ideal without a powerful mass base, by implication pointing to its limitations compared to the mass action called for by Marxism.

His book is all the more necessary because of the confusion shown on all sides by the sudden rebirth of this old technique. Apart from the uncritical adulation of the car-bomb and Armalite coming from some on the left, reaction to the fresh

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1. Ridley's comparison of the network of Ismaili conspiracy with the Fourth International (see below, Chapter III, note 5) is not a very apt one. Only six years earlier he had been involved in a sharp factional dispute with the Trotskyist movement: Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream*, London, 1986, pp 50-60.
 2. Marshall GS Hodgson, *The Order of the Assassins*, The Hague, 1955.
 3. Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins*, London, 1967.
 4. Enno Franzius, *History of the Order of the Assassins*, New York, 1969.
 5. Edward Burman, *The Assassins*, London, 1987.
 6. Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, London, 1971.

injection of religious frenzy into politics has ranged from perplexity to cowardice. Supporters of one tendency claiming to be the Fourth International found themselves approving of 'God is Great' in the streets of Tehran,⁷ while supporters of a rival organisation were betraying working-class militants to the no less noxious Iraqi regime.⁸ To turn to Ridley's book in the middle of all this is like a breath of fresh air.

The changes made in the text of this edition have been to assist the reader in a purely technical sense. The original, first produced in India, had a very unassuming appearance and was full of printer's 'devils', and never gained the recognition it deserved. These problems have been ironed out and, as most of the original sources are in Arabic, all names have been reduced to that language, which are the forms most easily recognised by English readers. With thanks to our supporters, and in the hope that it will encourage the application of Marxism to the history of periods other than the last two centuries, and of lands purely European, we give the book once more to the world.

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7. Brian Grogan, *Insurrection in Tehran*, London, 1979.

8. 'How the WRP Sold its Principles', *Workers News*, April 1988.

Introduction

Baron Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), an Austrian diplomat and an orientalist of eminence, wrote *Die Geschichte der Assassinen*, published in Vienna in 1818. The English translation of this work, *The History of the Assassins*, appeared in 1835.¹ Since then no book in English, exclusively devoted to the Assassins, has been published. Subsequent research appears only in scattered references in works such as Professor EG Browne's *A Literary History of Persia*;² Reverend FW Bussell's *Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages*;³ and in articles such as that of the late Professor DS Margoliouth in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.⁴

Von Hammer-Purgstall summed up all that could then be known or surmised of the famous heretical sect which added a word to English, to French, to German, in fact to the majority of Western languages.

The time has now come for a second English work for two reasons. Much has been added to our knowledge both of the Assassins themselves and of their influence in history.

Von Hammer-Purgstall, Austrian baron, ultra montane Catholic subordinate of that Prince Metternich who was the intellectual leader and architect of the furious reaction which followed the fall of Napoleon, was scarcely likely to be just, much less favourable to the most terrible secret society that ever set at nought public law, orthodox religion and despotic authority. A close study of his book reveals that he regarded the Assassins as the exemplar of the secret societies of his own day such as the French Freemasons, the German Illuminati, and, above all, the Italian Carbonari. Our baron, contemporary of the French Reign of Terror, of the persecution of the church, and of the death on the scaffold of an Austrian princess and French Queen, Marie Antoinette, declares his aim to be 'to present a lively picture of the pernicious influence of secret societies in government, and of the dreadful prostitution of religion to the horrors of unbridled ambition'. His contemporary bias, in this instance, seriously affected not only his judgement, but his accuracy, for he entirely missed the one fact indispensable to a full comprehension of the historic role of the Assassin sect – that Hasan-ibn-Sabah's aim was conservative, not subversive. This fact alone vitiates much of Hammer-Purgstall's argument and would justify another book on the Order of the Assassins written from a standpoint more historically correct.

Furthermore we have behind us today what the Austrian baron had in dim, if terrifying, perspective: a century of terror and counter-terror, culminating in the totalitarian despotisms of today. This period sheds a flood of lurid and penetrating light on that not dissimilar epoch of cultural decline and ideological conflict which marked the downfall of the classic Muslim civilisation of the Khalifs of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Christian era. That was the time of the strife between the Fatimid and Abbassid Khalifs; of the Eastern inroads of the terrible Turk and the

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1. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived From Oriental Sources*, London, 1835.
 2. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, four volumes, London, 1902.
 3. FW Bussell, *Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages*, London, 1918.
 4. DS Margoliouth, 'Assassins', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1909, pp 138–41.

still more terrible Tartar; of the Western hurricane represented by the Crusades; of the break-up of traditional faith and morals in the world of Islam, along with the contemporary cultural eclipse; of the jeremiad of Omar Khayyam over the dying civilisation and the time when the Assassins themselves made their lurid appearance on the stage of history, prior to the final collapse before the locust flight of the hordes of Jenghiz Khan. As a result of our own terrifying experiences, the present age possesses the understanding whereby to view the era of the Assassins with a greater sympathy and insight than was possible to the generation around 1818.

The age of Hasan-ibn-Sabah was one of decay, dissolution and ruin, and the special institutions of the Assassins were adopted as a means of survival: in particular their most peculiar characteristic, the technique of terror, to which they owe their name and lasting fame, was employed that they might survive in an age wherein survival could be secured in no other way.

The Assassins then, were neither mere robbers, using religion as a cloak for their murderous rapacity as did the Indian Thugs of a later day, nor were they necessarily the enemies of the human race as their European historian and his epoch supposed. Or if the followers of the 'Mountain Chief' were such, it was only incidentally and as part of their 'protective covering' in an age of iron. Fundamentally, and it is this central fact which constitutes their unique claim to distinction in the eyes of history, the Assassins represented a sect for whom the time for justice may now be said to have arrived. In particular, such a book is opportune for two reasons, one inherent in the nature of the time-process itself, the other arising from the peculiar nature of the subject. The evolution of Oriental studies in the able hands of scholars, both here and in other countries, has added much to our knowledge both of the Assassins themselves and of their influence upon the course of history in both East and West.

That the pages in the ensuing monograph labour under extensive obligations to the work of these men of profound learning goes without saying. It is, in any case, indicated, albeit insufficiently, in and by the numerous references to their works which are necessarily included in the pages that follow. 'Time', proverbially, 'effaces all things', and long before the point of annihilation is reached additions, modifications and subtractions are required in any and every branch of knowledge. This is especially so with regard to the Assassins, in view of the care with which the esoteric creed peculiar to the sect jealously guarded its secrets from prying eyes behind the mountain battlements of Alamut and Masyaf, where the 'Old Man of the Mountain' kept his court. It is consequently the 'time-lag' represented in the twentieth century by the Oriental scholarship of the early nineteenth which constitutes the first justification for the appearance in English of a second book on the Assassins.

The second, and much more imperative and urgent reason lies in the peculiar nature of the subject, to which fact reference has just been made above. Baron von Hammer-Purgstall wrote in 1818, on the morrow of the fall of Napoleon, at the very inception of that generation of furious reaction, of authoritarian mysticism in both Church and State, in religion and politics which endured from 1814-15, the dates of Napoleon's two abdications (ending the immediate epoch of the French Revolution), down to 1848. This last date was the year of the European revolutions which gave the death blow to feudalism and clericalism over two-thirds of Europe, their restoration proving subsequently impossible, at any rate in any permanent and secure sense. This generation of reaction was dominated by the 'Holy Alliance' of

Russia, Austria and Prussia, the guiding architect of which, and the intellectual leader of the European reaction for the whole of that generation, was the Austrian Chancellor, Prince Metternich, who was the immediate superior of the Austrian diplomat and aristocrat, Baron Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, the historian of the Assassins.

It follows from the above that an Austrian baron in the era of the 'Holy Alliance', of which the Hapsburg Empire was a pillar, a diplomatic colleague of the arch-reactionary and upholder of law and order, Prince Metternich – Austrian Imperial Chancellor, 1812–48 – and an orthodox member of the ultra montane Catholic Church of Pope Pius VII and Joseph de Maistre, was scarcely likely to be just, much less favourable, to the most terrible secret society that ever set at nought the traditions of orthodox religion, and the authority of despotic governments. Such was the sect of the Assassins – 'the cause of that terror which made kings tremble on their thrones and checked the angry anathemas of outraged orthodoxy'.⁵

It is, in fact, obvious from a close study of his book that the Austrian historian of the Assassins did not achieve that complete historical impartiality which would entirely have differentiated the diplomat of reactionary Austria from the objective historian of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, and of his successors. So far, in fact, was he from doing so that, *per contra*, he evidently regarded the Assassins as the prototype, exemplar and medieval counterpart of the secret societies of his own day, secret societies which an Austrian-Catholic official of the 'Holy Alliance' was bound to reprobate in the heyday of the European reaction. These were the French Freemasons, the German Illuminati; above all that subterranean menace to Pope and Emperor, to Law and Order, to Conservative Europe, and to Ultra montane Catholicism, the Italian Carbonari. Indeed, Von Hammer-Purgstall himself tells us in his final summary of his work:

In writing this history, we have set two things before us as our object, to have attained which is less our hope than our wish. *In the first place, to present a lively picture of the pernicious influence of secret societies in governments, and of the dreadful prostitution of religion to the horrors of unbridled ambition.*⁶

It is evident from the above that Von Hammer-Purgstall wrote his history, not purely in the interests of science, but rather, 'to point the moral and adorn the tale'. In recounting the history of the medieval terrorists of Asia, he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the contemporary European scene and on the modern terrorists, the revolutionary 'secret societies' of Italy, France and Germany, whose underground plots against throne and altar in the generation after the French Revolution disturbed the privileges of restored legitimacy and the dream of the 'Holy Alliance'. After all, Napoleon, the ogre of reactionary Europe, was still alive, the 'Old Man' of St Helena Mountain, while the French Revolution was still fresh in everyone's memory, and the mention by the historian of 'weak governments' was an obvious reference to the half-hearted capitulations of Louis XVI to the Paris mob, whom, in the expert opinion of Napoleon, 'a whiff of grapeshot' could have dispersed.

5. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, London, 1902, p 206.

6. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived From Oriental Sources*, Benares, 1926, pp 218–19.

Von Hammer-Purgstall had, after all, been a contemporary of the French terror, of the persecution of the Catholic Church, and of the death upon the scaffold of an Austrian princess, Marie Antoinette. All these dire events reappeared, subtly transmuted, in the 'history' of the Assassins, the medieval forerunners, in the historian's opinion, of the guillotine and the Jacobin Club. It is evident that a work of an historical character compiled from such a standpoint, however wide and accurate its erudition, must lack that measure of sympathy and understanding of its subject that is inseparable from the most profound historical research.

If the aim of universal history as defined by a certain school of historical philosophy is to understand the present in the light of the past, no less true is it that history aims at, and equally achieves, an understanding of the past in the light afforded by the present. Consequently, such an epoch of revolution as this in which we live, witnessing social and intellectual disintegration, in which some have surmised the impending dissolution of that modern civilisation, liberal and commercial, which arose in Europe at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, must necessarily throw a certain degree of light upon that other age of dissolution, conditioned by forces in many respects remarkably similar, which embraced the civilisation of Asia west of the Ganges in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Christian era. The age of the decline of the great Mohammedan civilisation which stretched from Central Asia to Spain, from the Hindu-Kush to the Pyrenees; of the fall of the Muslim 'Papacy', the Khalifat; of the passage of supremacy within the world of Islam itself from the civilised Arabs and Persians to the barbarous Turks. This was the very age which culminated in the most terrible cultural obliteration that the world has ever known, the annihilation of the classical Muslim civilisation of Central Asia by the all-destroying hordes of the 'world conqueror', Jenghiz Khan, who strewed the 'golden road to Samarkand' with ghastly pyramids of human skulls in an orgy of destruction. Compared to the permanent and irrevocable destruction thus effected, even the wholesale destruction caused by the Thirty Years War (1618-48) 'pales its ineffectual fires', and the 'vandalisms' of the German conquerors of Rome, even of Attila, the Hunnish 'Scourge of God' himself, assume an absolute insignificance.

For such were the times of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, of the Assassins, and the peculiar institutions of that sect were adapted to meet the exigencies of that age of decay, dissolution and ruin. 'The times were out of joint', and even in the shaken world of Western Asia in the Middle Ages the 'Darwinian' doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' held good. That the killer is more 'fit' to survive than the killed was known to the Sheikhs of the Assassins eight centuries before the *Origin of Species* (1859) established the fact upon ample scientific foundations, derived from the study alike of the animal kingdom and of human institutions, and proven beyond any doubt to be a universal 'law' of both natural and human evolutions.

Fundamentally, and it is this central fact which constitutes their unique claim to distinction in the eyes of history, the Assassins represented a sect which evolved a philosophy of survival, a defensive terrorism wherewith to terrorise an age of terror. By virtue of this terror — systematic assassination — they kept at arms' length a hostile world which they were not strong enough to resist openly. Too weak numerically to contend in the open field with the powerful Turkish Sultans of the Near East, or with the iron-clad Western Crusaders, they evolved a technique of secret killing. They assassinated — and survived!

In short, these Oriental prototypes of Machiavelli realised instinctively, four centuries before the writing of *The Prince* (1513), that 'the means' not merely 'justifies', but is conditioned by and towards 'the end', the unique end, survival.

In the light of the above facts, it is evident that the author of the following pages does not present the history of the Assassins from an angle at all similar to that from which the pre-Darwinian Von Hammer-Purgstall, a professional hater of 'secret societies', approaches his material. Far from constituting any 'subversive menace' to the classical Muslim civilisation of their times – such a 'menace', for instance, as the Italian Carbonari were in the early nineteenth century to the legitimist-clerical Austrian monarchy which Von Hammer-Purgstall himself served – the followers of the 'Old Man of the Mountain' represented what was from many points of view the last stand, the final oasis of the classical civilisation of the Mohammedan East, before it went down under the incoming flood of the destroying waves of barbarism represented successively by the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks and the Tartar armies of Jenghiz Khan, Hulagu and Tamerlane. The strongholds of the Assassins represented oases amid the flood.

For 166 years – 1090-1256 – the walls of Alamut held that flood at bay or, rather, it held a hostile world at bay by 'arguments weighty and trenchant', as the Assassins themselves described with grim humour their own techniques of intimidation. It was, above all, by terrorism, practised as an art, and conducted upon the principles of an exact science, that the disciples of Hasan-ibn-Sabah preserved their oasis, their 'Eagle's Nest' – Alamut – from the encroachments of a hostile world. The universal loathing in which their name was held was yet checked by, and subordinated to, the still more lively terror which was common to Muslim and Christian, to East and West, to Turk and Frank alike, at the thought of that ubiquitous dagger which at all times and places where the interests of the Order required it, 'stands ready to smite once and smite no more'.

It is, then, as an episode in, and as an offshoot from, the classic civilisation of the Muslim Golden Age that the history of the Assassins is presented in the following chapters. The sect of the 'Hashishin', or 'Assassins', when viewed from a perspective rather cultural than religious, may be defined with essential truth as the Mohammedan civilisation in 'a state of siege', just as the Jesuit Order, which may be considered with considerable justice as its authentic technical successor, represented in the epoch of the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the similar phenomenon of Catholicism in a state of siege, of the medieval Church surrounded on every hand by a rebellious world and by an alien and antagonistic culture that departed, ever more and more widely, from the standards set up by the Catholic civilisation of medieval times. (This comparison, already made elsewhere by the author, will be referred to more than once in the course of the ensuing pages.) In many respects the Assassins were the 'Jesuits' of Islam, and their history lends itself to treatment from an historical standpoint broadly similar.

We propose, therefore, to consider the Assassins primarily as an historical force, and not as a mere secret society; from the standpoint of a social and cultural historian, and not from that of a police spy or a moralist intent only on the preservation of 'law and order' – a point of view approximating to that taken up by Von Hammer-Purgstall, and to achieve this purpose, the following procedure is adopted.

In a first, introductory part, we trace the historic background, without some consideration of which, the rise and even the nature, of the Ismaili movement which

culminated in the sect founded, or rather developed, by Hasan-ibn-Sabah, is completely unintelligible.

In the second part, a sketch is presented of the career of Hasan-ibn-Sabah himself, and of his successors in both the original Persian and the derivative Syrian branches of the sect (or order, as it may, in some respect at least, be more accurately styled) down to, and including, the downfall of the Persian Assassins at the hands of the Tartars, and of the Syrians before the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt. In this section no attempt will be made to achieve a superfluous originality, as the facts relating to the Assassins have already been treated *in extenso* in the writings of Von Hammer-Purgstall himself, supplemented by the more recent researches of Orientalists of a later date.

In the third part, we shall consider, from the standpoint indicated above, that which was peculiar to, and distinctive of the movement founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah – its *raison d'être*, its organisation, its peculiar combination of free-thought and blind fanaticism, of intellectual libertinism and 'corpse-like obedience', its unique technique of terror, and the fantastic background of that terror; its technical triumphs in the 'art' whence it derives its name, and the ultimate source whence the derivation of that name – Assassin – can be traced.

This accomplished, two further matters will be briefly touched upon – *viz*: the influence of the Assassins – via the medium afforded by the Crusaders and the civilisation of Muslim Spain – upon the subsequent history of Europe and upon the fortunes and composition of such later movements as the Templars and the Company of Jesus, and the points of ideological and technical resemblance between the Assassins and the Nihilists and other revolutionary movements of past and present times. Here too, the author has no political axe to grind and – unlike Nesta Webster, and to a certain extent, even Von Hammer-Purgstall himself in the work cited above – he does not subscribe to any 'hidden-hand' interpretation of history. The facts are, throughout, considered objectively, in accordance with that well-known dictum which may be summarised thus: the historian who takes sides is no longer on the side of history.⁷

Two points only remain to be noted. In the history of all subterranean movements, living outside and against their contemporary historic society, as were throughout the disciples of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, much must be inferred that cannot be submitted to experimental proof. Such movements have only their enemies for their historians, and impartial, still less sympathetic, treatment is not to be looked for in such sources. Who, for example, would judge the Protestant Reformers by the Catholic pamphleteers who so scurrilously denounced them? What would we know of Oliver Cromwell and the epoch-making event for which he was responsible if only literature of the type of the *Eikon Basilike* survived to describe them? Nor is it difficult to imagine what would be the state of our knowledge of some of the greatest events of our own time if only hostile witnesses were available. For example, one does not require to be a Communist to admit that a history of the Russian Revolution compiled exclusively by, and for, the Committee of the Carlton Club would make intriguing reading rather than exact history. The Assassins, the Nihilists of Asia, or when viewed from another angle, the 'Jesuits of Islam', have suffered at the hands of their orthodox 'historians' as many and as grievous things

7. Nesta Webster, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, London, 1924.

as have their antitypes aforementioned. The ensuing pages have at least no such bias.

Finally, the human mind is so constituted that it falls victim to a perennial fascination when confronted by the recurring spectacle of opposites intertwined until they become identical, that phenomenon apprehended by philosophy as the 'interpenetration of opposites'. In consequence there can be no more intriguing spectacle than is represented by a movement founded to defend free-thought by fanatical submissiveness, intellectual anarchy by political autocracy: civilisation by methods before which barbarism itself recoils in horror. In the ambrosial gardens of Alamut and the Lebanon an epicurean paradise was guarded by the dagger of the fanatic; sceptical science sheltered behind the blindest self-sacrifice that superstition could enjoin; an oasis of the higher intellectual culture was shielded by a 'science' of terrorism, as coldly ruthless and as technically efficient as any which the world has known, our own age of science not excluded. This spectacle of opposites completely identified, afforded by the Assassins to an incredulous world for a century and a half, enshrines the order founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah in a unique niche in the vast temple of human memories and gives to the present monograph which constitutes, with whatever deficiencies in learning, the first *sympathetic* account of the Assassins in the English language – any excuse the author may claim for writing it, and any passing interest, if not permanent value, that it may possess.⁸

8. This original Indian edition was published originally in 1938 and does not include any reference to recent historical parallels with the Assassins – Author's note, 1986.

Chapter I: The Rise of Islam

Prior to the seventh century of the Christian era, the vast peninsula now styled collectively as 'Arabia' represented merely a 'geographical expression' in the political world of both East and West. The bulk of the sand-strewn deserts which make up its vast hinterland represented merely a vague *terra incognita*, inhabited solely by wandering Bedouins, who under the generic title of 'sons of Midian' periodically emerged upon the fertile plains to the north and east, Iraq and Palestine, where they achieved that sinister reputation as robbers which survives in the writings of the Old Testament, composed by members of one of the settled agricultural races of Palestine upon whom they preyed, and against whose settled terrain their desultory raids were periodically directed.

Only upon its western sea-coast, in Yemen, and in the proximity of the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb (that is, 'The Gate of Tears') did any indigenous Arab civilisation put in an autonomous appearance. From the time of the Queen of Sheba, beloved of Solomon and the legendary ancestress of the Ethiopian people, if not of that earlier Egyptian Pharaoh, Queen Hatsheput, whose mariners scoured the Somali and Arab coasts in search of frankincense as early as 1500 BC, the coasts of the Yemen were no strangers to commerce and to civilisation, and as 'Arabia the Fortunate', 'Arabia Felix', this part of the vast peninsula entered the geography and the vocabulary of the ancient European world and of the Roman Empire. Like Germany and Ireland in the West, Arabia always lay beyond its frontiers. Itself the borderland, so to speak, between East and West, it represented the ideal starting-point for the swing of the historic pendulum when the time at last arrived for the East to effect its recoil against the long domination of the West represented by the Empire of the Caesars.

The historic hour of that 'recoil' arrived early in the seventh century AD. The form it took was the movement of Islam, its author was the prophet Mohammed, and its actual leaders were the Khalifs – successors to Mohammed, who, from the year 632 onwards led the newly formed Arab nation in a Jihad – or Holy War – against both the Christian nations of the West and the Pagan nations of the East. Arriving upon the historic scene at a moment when both East and West, the Persian and Byzantine empires, and also the Northern barbarians who had conquered Rome, were in a state of decadence and exhaustion following upon their endless internecine wars, Islam burst upon them like a thunderclap, and, under the leadership of some of the greatest war-leaders whom the world can have known – the details of their battles are lost in legend, but the facts speak for themselves – the newly formed Arab nation, invigorated by an infusion of religious and juridical ideas superbly adapted to the stage of evolution reached by seventh-century Arabia, speedily became the centre of a vast empire – one of the most extensive that the world has ever known – in an incredibly short space of time.¹

1. According to Muslim traditions themselves, the Prophet was a member of the cadet branch of the aristocratic family of the Koreish, the ruling clan of the market town of Mecca, whence the Prophet himself originated. (Professor Margoliouth, the eminent Arabic scholar, is however critical of this affiliation.) From 570 to 610 Mohammed is reported to have engaged in trade, but in the latter year, when aged about forty, he began to exercise a prophetic role. At first his teaching met with but little success, and in 622 he was forced to fly to Medina, where the Koran was written, and where Mohammed organised a militant – and military – movement, which prior to his death in 632 had subdued the greater part of Arabia, the capture of Mecca occurring

Whereas in 632 the prophet Mohammed in his own dying words became 'a guest on high' – leaving his historic task of unifying Arabia barely concluded – exactly a century later the Arab Empire had reached and included the Punjab and Central Asia, its horsemen were contending with Charles Martel and his Franks in mid-France, and the armies of the Khalifs were knocking insistently on the gates of Constantinople. Moreover, while the Arabs were painfully expelled from Europe – which today knows only one Mohammedan land, Albania – the conquests of Islam in Asia and Africa have proved permanent, and both Christianity in Western Asia and North Africa, and also the Zoroastrian Church in Persia and Central Asia, have either been permanently obliterated, or else exist today only on sufferance. Where else in human history have such extensive conquests been won so rapidly on the political and military fields, and held so long on the religious and cultural fields as by Islam? Search how and where we will, it is not possible to find an equivalent phenomenon such as was represented by the marvellous expansion which characterised the outward thrust of Islam throughout the first century of its existence.

The personality whose astonishing career formed at least the ostensible starting point of this phenomenal outpouring of human energy, was the Prophet Mohammed (570–632). Historians far better qualified than the present writer to form a definitive opinion about that extraordinary man, have yet completely failed to do so with regard to his personal character or even as to his ultimate aims. One cannot, even now, say whether the founder of Islam was primarily a religious and moral leader or a nationalist politician, or how far his masterpiece, the Koran, was his own work or that of others. The most eminent authorities differ considerably upon even such elementary questions as these. In particular, no agreement has yet been reached by experts even on the most important question of all: whether Mohammed consciously intended to found a universal religion or whether he was consciously an Arab nationalist, whose historic vision was limited to approximate conception of 'the Arab nation, one and indivisible' to employ the political phraseology in vogue at a later day. What is however certain and beyond dispute is that, as the result of the career and historic work of the Prophet, the scattered tribes of Arabia were temporarily united into an Arabian nation, one aggressive with pent-up energies of long ages of forced inactivity; and that in this doctrine of 'Islam' (submission) was framed with superb artistry so as to become as no other religion or ethical or juridical code has ever become – the very bone and sinew, warp and woof of every nation that embraces it, whose cultural and moral level is similar to that appertaining to the Arabs of the seventh century – to the spiritual needs of whom the Koran was originally addressed. Whatever view or theory about the historic career of Mohammed may be entertained – and as observed above, there are many conflicting ideas regarding these – this much at least can hardly be questioned.

in 629. The system of Islam, or 'submission' as Mohammed himself styled it, is a rigid system of monotheism, derived in part at least from the teachings of the Jewish prophets. One could in fact describe it as 'Jewish Catholicism' or international Judaism. That orthodox Islam has changed so little is no doubt due to the fact that, as Professor EG Browne expresses it: 'The great strength of Islam lies in its simplicity, its adaptability, its high yet perfectly attainable ethical standard.' – Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, London, 1902, p 188.

Nor is it really doubtful that Islam was, speaking generally, a beneficent force, monotheistic in creed, and essentially democratic in its social character and influence.

Upon the level of an elemental monotheism, one derived originally in part at least from the Jewish prophets, the Arab Reformer created a 'totalitarian' creed embracing legal, ethical and juridical enactments equally with 'revelations' of a purely religious character; a creed of such a nature that it had, and still has today, an irresistible attraction for vast congeries of people from farthest Asia to 'darkest' Africa and which fits into, and permanently influences, the lives of such peoples in a manner that more idealistic creeds such as Christianity and Buddhism have proved utterly incapable of doing. While Mohammed created both a nation and an international creed, and may himself actually have considered the former to be his more substantial achievement, yet the actual course of history has seen the Arab nation unable to stay the pace and break up again into its original pre-Mohammedan disunity. While Islam survived, the force that had originally brought it into being, outlasting the Arab nation and eventually the Empire of the Khalifs itself, has proved capable of surviving its political protector and of enduring as a purely spiritual force. But it was not until the thirteenth century that Islam in the sense of a pure or spiritual idea distinct from contemporary political institutions, came into existence.

Until the destruction of the Abbassid Khalifs by the Mongols (or Tartars) in 1258, the religion of Islam was, in theory at any rate, identical with the temporal dominions of one or another claimants for the supreme authority of the Khalif, the vice-regent of Mohammed, 'the Commander of the Faithful'. Until that time the only method of imposing their tenets on the world which was open to the various heresies and sects which began to appear within the bosom of Islam when the first flush of victory was past, was to get control of the Islamic Papacy, the Khalifat, or if that method failed they were compelled to set up a rival Khalif, an 'anti-Pope', of their own. As we shall soon have occasion to see, it was this necessity which dominated the struggle which broke out within the bosom of Islam of the great Muslim heresies against Mohammedan orthodoxy, the Sunni 'Catholicism', when once its primary era of irresistible conquest had come to an end.

The first heroic epoch came to an end upon the assassination of Othman, the third Khalif to succeed Mohammed, when the subsequent election of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, was opposed by the Arab aristocracy led by the Umayyads, who after the murder of Ali ascended the throne — or Papal Chair of Islam, as in some respects it may be more accurately styled. This event occurred in 660, thirty-eight years after the Hegira, or flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina — the year one of Muslim chronology — and twenty-eight years after the death of Mohammed himself in 632. During the course of this generation Islam had made outstanding progress. The Arab nation, united by Mohammed, was reunited by Abu Bakr after his death, in the teeth of internal revolt. Under the second Khalif, the great Omar, the supreme War Lord and 'Carnot' of Islam, the countries of Persia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and a major part of Asia Minor fell before the armies of Islam. Under Othman, 644-656, the Arabs entered North Africa and Central Asia. Indeed upon the frontiers Islam retained much of its pristine energy until well into the next century. Its last major conquest Spain, 711-712, proved to be one of its most valuable. Its northern advance was not stopped until 732, the year of the battle of Poitiers when the heavily armed Franks checked the Arab advance just about the same time that the Arabs were repulsed by the Emperor Leo the Isaurian from the gates of Constantinople. By this time, however, the primitive unity of Islam had already been irrevocably lost.

To write a detailed history of Islam and of its golden age of conquest forms no part of the scope of the present work, to the proper field of which, the history and historic role of the Assassins, it is irrelevant in detail though necessary in introductory outline. I confine myself therefore to citing the lucid summary of the first conquering age of Islam given by two historians, a modern German historian and an ancient Arab one. In the remarkable summary of mediaeval European history which precedes his brilliant monograph on the Utopia of Sir Thomas More, writes:

The most dangerous enemy of the settled Teutonic tribes was however the Arabs, or rather the Saracens, as the writers of the Middle Ages called all those Eastern peoples set in motion by the Arabs to seek booty and a habitat in more highly civilised countries.²

In the year 638 the Arabs invaded Egypt and quickly conquered the whole northern coast of Africa; they appeared at the beginning of the eighth century in Spain and not quite a hundred years after they invaded Egypt they threatened France. Charles Martel's victory near Tours saved France from the fate of the Empire of the Western Goths, but the Saracens were by no means rendered powerless. They stayed in Spain, established themselves in North Italy and in Southern France, occupied the most important Alpine paths, and sallied forth to raid the northern slopes of the Alps.

One can add that their progress eastwards was as rapid as was their advance in the West. Iraq, Persia and Central Asia fell successively before them and they advanced to the frontiers of India. The battle of Nehavend (641) put an end to the existence of the powerful Persian Empire whose last Sassanian king perished obscurely in the wastes of Central Asia.

The primitive Golden Age of Islam during which the conquests of the 'ever-victorious army' — cited above — took place is thus described with trenchant eloquence by the early Arab historian, Al-Fakhri:

Know that this was a state not after the fashion of the states of this world, but rather resembling prophetic dispensations and the conditions of the world to come. And the truth concerning it is that its fashion was after the fashion of the Prophets and its conduct after the model of the Saints, while its victories were as those of mighty kings. Now as for its fashion, this was hardship in life and simplicity in raiment: one of them [that is, the early Khalifs — FAR] would walk through the streets on foot, wearing but a tattered shirt reaching half-way down his leg and sandals on his feet, and carrying in his hand a whip, wherewith he inflicted punishment on such as deserved it. And their food was of the humblest of the poor; the Commander of the Faithful, Omar, on whom be peace, spoke of honey and fine bread as typical of luxury for he said: 'If I wished I could have the finest of this honey and the softest of this barley bread.'

Know further that they were not abstinent in respect to their goods and raiment from poverty or inability to procure the most sumptuous apparel or the sweetest meats, but they used to do this to put themselves on an equality with the poorest of their subjects, and to wean the flesh from its lusts, and to discipline it till it should accustom itself to its highest

2. Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and his Utopia*, London, 1927.

potentialities; else was each one of them endowed with ample wealth and palm-groves and gardens and other like possessions. But most of their expenditure was in charitable uses and offerings; the Commander of the Faithful, Ali — on whom be peace! — had from his properties an abundant revenue, all of which he spent on the poor and needy, while he and his family contented themselves with coarse cotton and a loaf of barley bread.³

Such was the apostolic age of Islam, which began with the Flight (Hegira) of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina (622) and ended with the murder of Ali, the Fourth Khalif, in 661. There followed the succession of the worldly and half-pagan Umayyads (661–750), a dynasty sprung from the pre-Muslim aristocracy, and themselves far from enthusiastic in their attachment to the teachings of the Koran.

With the inauguration of the Umayyad dynasty with their capital at Damascus, there began a period of increasing worldliness and imitation of the customs of pre-Muslim civilisations, with a consequent loss of religious ardour and political militancy. More significant even than these signs of decay was that Islam lost its primitive unity along with its original aggressiveness. Heresies and schisms began to make their appearance, the first and most fundamental of which, one that has endured from then until our own day, arose directly out of the murder of Ali and the subsequent accession of the Umayyad dynasty.

For from 661 right down to and including the present day, the world of Islam has been split asunder by the gigantic gulf that yawns between the majority movement of Muslim orthodoxy, the Sunnis, the adherents of the Umayyad or Abbasid Khalifs, and the minority, the Shi'a, or Alid, movement which maintained against the orthodox Khalifs of the majority of the Islamic world, the legitimist rights of Ali and his descendants to the Khalifat, the apostolic throne of Islam. Into this abyss it is now necessary to descend.

3. Further: 'As for their victories and their battles, verily their cavalry reached Africa and the utmost parts of Khorasan and crossed the Oxus.'

Chapter II: The 'Sect of the Seven'

The murder of Ali, the fourth Khalif, in the midst of civil war, opened the way to the accession of the Umayyad dynasty, descendants of Abu Sofian, one of Mohammed's bitter enemies in his early prophetic days, a dynasty which itself was largely out of sympathy with the teaching of the prophet. During the reign of this worldly and half-pagan dynasty (661-750) they opened the way — as remarked above — to the period of worldliness and steep reaction against the rigorous Puritan doctrines of the Founder of Islam and his immediate successors, the first four Khalifs. Just as the French and Russian revolutions of modern times have been followed by periods of compromise and mere lip-service to the iconoclastic and uprooting teaching of the original founders, so the same phenomenon occurred after the generation which had witnessed the Hegira and the rise to prominence of Mohammed, had passed away.

Under the New Khalifs, while victories continued to be won on the frontiers, in Spain (711-772) and elsewhere, in the centre of the Arab Empire spiritual decay proceeded *pari-passu* with the growth of luxury and the re-emergence of pre-Muslim traditions in ethics and culture. Some of the Umayyad Khalifs not merely surrounded themselves with a luxury entirely alien to the Spartan regime of the Prophet and his immediate successors, as described above by Al Fakhri, but several of the Khalifs of Damascus were so little attached to the precepts of the Koran that they appeared drunk in the pulpit and patronised the work of free-thinking scientists, while the general atmosphere of their court was far closer to that of the pre-Muslim Shahs of Persia than it was to that of the early Mohammedan zealots.

In his classical work, *The Literary History Persia*, Professor EG Browne characterises the rule of the dynasty of Damascus as 'the period of Arabian Imperialism and Pagan Reaction', adding:

The triumph of the Umayyads was in reality the triumph of the party which, at heart, was hostile to Islam; and the sons of the Prophet's most inveterate foes now, unchanged at heart, posed as his successors and legitimate vice-regents and silenced with the sword those who dared to murmur against their innovations. Nor was cause for murmuring far to seek even in the reign of the first Damascus Khalif, Mu'awiya, who in the splendour of his court at Damascus, and in the barriers which he set between himself and his humbler subjects, took as his models the Byzantine Emperors and Persian kings rather than the first vicars of the Prophet. In the same spirit he nominated his son Yazid as his successor, and forced this unwelcome nomination on the people of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina.¹

In face of this worldly and lukewarm dynasty it cannot be wondered that zealous believers in the revelation of the Koran tended to go into opposition and to look back regretfully to the golden age of the 'primitive theocracy' (Browne), when 'none were for the party and all were for the state', the epoch — no doubt somewhat idealised — both of Islam's astounding victories and of the fine simplicity which characterised its first generation. And what more natural than that this movement of conservative

1. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, London, 1902, p 224.

opposition to the epicurean degeneration effected by the Umayyads should solidify around the memory of Ali and the claims of his surviving descendants? Ali was the last Khalif of the 'heroic' period of Islam; and there was even some reason for thinking that Mohammed had intended him as his immediate successor. He was himself a figure not devoid of heroism with chivalrous qualities of the heart rather than the head, such as enjoy in all ages a wide popular appeal. Last, but the reverse of least, he was the husband of Fatima, the only daughter of Mohammed to leave behind offspring, who thus alone could claim descent from the most sacred figure in human history, the last and greatest of the prophets of God, Mohammed himself.

It was therefore quite natural that the growing opposition to the Umayyad secularisation of Islam centred on the living descendants of Ali, the last of the puritan Khalifs, whose own murder when engaged in suppressing the rebellion of the Umayyads had paved the way both for their succession to the throne, and for the moral and religious degeneration which dated from that event.

The formal date of the inauguration of the Shi'a, or 'Faction' of Ali, the greatest of Muslim heresies, was the year 680, when the only surviving grandson of the prophet Hosein, son of Ali and Fatima, staged an armed rising against Yazid, the Second Khalif of the Umayyad dynasty (680-683). This rising ended disastrously on the fatal field of Kerbela, the 'Calvary' of the Shi'a movement, where Hosein and his adherents were overwhelmed by the forces of the Khalif and perished to a man. (Hassan, Ali's eldest son, had already been poisoned in 669 by the first Umayyad Khalif.) The tragedy of Kerbela is still commemorated in Shi'a communities such as Persia with a tragic ritual that resembles the ceremonies which recall the passion of Christ in Catholic communities. From that time on, the breach between the orthodox – or rather, majority – Muslims who gave allegiance to Damascus, and the newly formed sect of the Shi'a, the 'Jacobites' of Islam, as one can style with some justice these legitimist devotees of the hereditary principle, was impassable and beyond healing. A mist of blood, annually recalled among the Shi'as by the memory of the Kerbela massacre, cut them off by an unbridgeable gulf from the rest of the Mohammedan world.

From that time on, the adherents of Ali represented their own beliefs as the true doctrines of Islam and regarded the rest of the world of Islam as sunk in impiety, heresy and schism; and since in a theocratic civilisation Church and State, theory and practice, are inseparably united, the Shi'as henceforth not merely rejected in theory the claims of the Damascus dynasty to reign, but also plotted unceasingly to deprive them of the authority which they had usurped by their original revolt against Ali, maintained by their brutal suppression of the revolt of Hosein, and by other subsequent acts of impiety, such as the sack of the Holy City, Mecca, by the armies of the Sacrilegious Khalif, Abd-El-Malik, grandson of Yazid (691).²

While, however, the Shi'ites sought to effect the violent overthrow of the Umayyad Khalifs, that did not occur until seventy years after the tragedy of Kerbela,

2. The Shi'a sect has never lost its hatred for the Umayyads, the original schismatics, as they regard them. In particular, the name of Yazid, the murderer of Hosein, is still a name of execration in modern Persia-Iran and other Shi'ite communities. Browne wrote:

No name is more execrated throughout Islam than his, but most of all in Persia. A Persian who will remain unmoved by such epithets as 'liar', 'scoundrel' or 'robber', will fly into a passion if you call him 'Yazid'. – Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, p 225.

and though the followers of Ali took part in the eventual rising which finally ended the Damascus Khalifat, that event was not achieved primarily by them, nor was it the descendants of Ali who succeeded to the Apostolic throne of Islam upon the downfall of the Umayyads (749–751).

On the contrary, Abu Muslim, the ‘Cromwell’ of the Muslim Civil War, was a Persian from Khorasan – north-east Persia and a ‘da’is’, or ‘propagandist’, on behalf of the claims of the Abbassids, the descendants of the uncle of the Prophet, Abbas; and it was this Abbassid dynasty which Abu Muslim proclaimed in 749, and which retained at least nominal possession of the Muslim ‘Papacy’ down to 1258, when Baghdad fell before the Tartars of Hulagu, the grandson of Jenghiz Khan. The last Khalif of Damascus, Marvan II, ‘The Wild Ass’, was, indeed, overthrown in a great battle on the site of Alexander the Great’s former victory at Arbela (25 January 750), and the Umayyads were subsequently almost exterminated, but, while all the opposition factions in the world of Islam united to achieve this result, it was the Abbassids who reaped the harvest. For five centuries they reigned as Khalifs, Pope-Emperors, over Islam. The murder of their benefactor, Abu Muslim, to whom they owed their throne (756), confirmed them in the undisputed exercise of its authority. Once again, the unlucky or simple heirs of Ali had been deceived in their expectations.³

The accession of the Abbassid Dynasty (750–1258) initiated that period in the history and civilisation of Islam which an eminent Orientalist describes as ‘the period of Persian ascendancy’, in which the centre of Mohammedan culture shifted from the democratic and comparatively simple Arabs to the aristocratic and subtle Persians, to whom, rather than to the Arabs and Moors, the brilliant medieval civilisation of Islam was chiefly due. The leading ideas of the Abbassid epoch were Persian rather than Arabic in character; and there was, in reality, little that was Arab about the ‘Arabian Nights’, whose background is the predominantly Persian Court of the famous Abbassid Khalif, Haroun-al-Raschid (786–809) and his Minister, the Persian Barmecide. The period of the early Abbassids was one of great material prosperity and of a dazzling efflorescence of cultural activity – the impact of Islam on the older cultural forms of the Near and Middle East leading to the creation of a new and distinctive culture, the brilliant Asiatic culture of the Mohammedan East, forming a striking contrast to the contemporary darkness of the Christian West. From the latter part of the ninth century on, Baghdad, while retaining its position as a centre of culture, began to lose its political importance, as the Khalifs, from that time on, began to fall under the control of their Turkish bodyguards, an ominous foretaste of what was to be the final fate of the great Muslim civilisation at the hands of the Turks and Tartars.⁴

The victory of the Abbassids had been achieved as a result of a temporary coalition of all the discontented forces in the Muslim East against the ‘Arabian Imperialism’ of the Umayyad dynasty, but the elevation of the Abbassids to the

3. The Umayyads henceforth were confined to Spain, where Abd-er-Rahman, a cadet of the family, succeeded in escaping, and where he founded a dynasty which lasted some three centuries, and which presided over the zenith of the civilisation of Muslim Spain, for long the only civilised country in Europe: Joseph MacCabe, *The Splendour of Moorish Spain*, London, 1935.

4. The last Abbassid Khalif to play an active role was Vathek (842–847) – the subject of Beckford’s famous romance of that name. After his time the Khalifs became puppets in the hands of their Turkish guards, the ‘Praetorian Guard’ of Islam.

Apostolic throne, the Khalifat, necessarily dissolved this alliance. The adherents of the hereditary claims of the House of Ali, the direct descendants of the Unique Prophet, felt no more disposed to admit the paramount claims of the Abbassids, a mere collateral branch of the Prophet's family, than the modern Jacobites felt inclined, after the death of Queen Anne in 1714, to waive the hereditary Divine Right of the Stuarts in favour of the remote collateral claims of the House of Hanover. The parallel, indeed, is a close one, for the spread of Persian ideas under the Abbassids, profoundly affected the Shi'ites, whose chief stronghold has always been Persia. Among the Persian Zoroastrians, prior to the Muslim conquest, the ideas of Divine Right and Hereditary Succession had become endemic under the Nationalist rule of the Kings of the House of Sassan, who ruled over the Zoroastrian worshippers of sun and fire for four glorious centuries before the Arab Conquest (226-641).⁵

The followers of Ali, however, though unrivalled in the persistence with which they adhered to their doctrine, do not seem to have been a very efficient opposition prior to their reorganisation by the conspiratorial genius of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun. At any rate, during the first century of Abbassid rule (750-850), the chief opposition came from pretenders of even more bizarre claims and fantastic character than were the Shi'a 'Imams' themselves. The rising of Babak (816-838) shook the Abbassid regime to its foundations, and of an even more singular character was the rising of Al-Muqanna, the celebrated 'Veiled Prophet of Khorasan' (780-786) – so-called from his custom of hiding his feature behind a green veil (or, according to another account, a gold mask). This rising was only put down after great slaughter. Many non-Mohammedan ideas, such as the transmigration of souls and Divine reincarnations, the latter unutterable blasphemy to a 'True Believer' in the Koran, made their appearance in the form of Muslim heresies, and while orthodox Sunni Islam at this period tended towards rationalism and pantheism, many eccentric doctrines spread among the heretical Muslim sects. The Irish poet Thomas Moore in his poem *Lalla Rookh*, thus describes the 'Veiled Prophet':

In that delightful province of the sun,
 The first of Persian lands he shines upon,
 Where all the loveliest children of his beam
 Flow'rets and fruits, blush over every stream,
 And fairest of all streams, the Murga roves,
 Among Mero's bright palaces and groves,
 There on that throne, to which the blind belief
 Of millions raised him, sat the Prophet-Chief,
 The Great Mokanna. Over his feature hung
 The veil, the silver veil, which he had flung
 In mercy there, to hide from mortal sight
 His dazzling brow, till man could bear its light.
 For, far less luminous, his votaries said,
 Were e'en the gleams, miraculously shed,
 O'er Moussa's cheeks, when down the Mount he trod,
 All glowing from the presence of his God.

5. It was during the Abbassid period that there grew up that close identification of devotion to the claims of the House of Ali and of Persian nationalist feeling which has always given Persia a unique position within the Mohammedan world in both medieval and modern times: Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1.

It may be added that, of the many strange sects of mingled Zoroastrian, Muslim and pagan origin who made their appearance at this time, several still exist today, most notably the 'Chaldaean' Mandaean, and the fantastic Yezidis, who still live near Mosul, and adore 'Melek Taus', 'The Peacock King', venerate Satan and religiously abhor the colour blue.

In the midst of this flood of mysticism, the Shi'ite movement, the 'Left' or, rather, 'Right' of Islam, since it was essentially a conservative movement, did not remain unaffected. Down to the 'split' in 765, the followers of Ali were united as regards their doctrine, which Professor EG Browne, in his classical book already cited, describes as follows:

The Shi'a agree generally in their veneration for Ali and their rejection of his three predecessors, Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and in their recognition of the Imams of the house of Ali as the chosen representatives of God, supernaturally gifted and divinely appointed leaders, whose right to the allegiance of the faithful is derived directly from heaven, not from any agreement or election of the Church. Briefly they may be defined as the supporters of the principle of Divine Right as opposed to the principle of Democratic Election.⁶

After the death of the Sixth Imam — that is, successor of Ali — the sect split (765); one part accepting six successive descendants of the Sixth Imam as legitimate Imams, and the other accepting a seventh Imam, Ismail, a son of the Sixth Imam, who had predeceased his father, but who his followers asserted had been hidden in a 'secret place'. From there he would return in God's own time to rule over mankind as the Mahdi, or last of the Prophets, who, according to a doubtful 'tradition', Mohammed himself had designated as his ultimate and greater successor.

Thus originated the celebrated sect of Ismailis, 'the sect of the seven', who, thanks to the genius for conspiracy possessed by one of their leaders, eventually came to play a great part in the history and political and cultural evolution of the Mohammedan East. At first, indeed, it was not evident that it would be so. For the first century of their existence the Ismailis gave no proof of the power which they were destined to wield, nor of the name of terror which they were destined to become. During their first period they remained a comparatively insignificant sect, politically harmless, though in opposition to the Abbassids, to whom, however, they at first gave no cause for fear. During this century, that of the greatest power and prosperity of the Abbassid dynasty, 'the sect of the seven' had been merely an ordinary sect of the Shi'ites, distinguished by its recognition of Ismail as the last Imam, and by the profession of an allegorical doctrine.⁷

From this harmless, if extravagant, belief the 'sect of the seven' was emancipated towards the end of the ninth century when the Ismaili movement was reinvigorated, reorganised and revived by one of the many remarkable men who, throughout the world and history of Islam, have appeared to combine mysticism and rationalism, religious dissent and political revolution. For such was the historic role of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun Qaddah, the 'Catiline' and the 'Bakunin' of Islam, perhaps as superior to his Roman prototype and Russian antitype in conspiratorial

6. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, p 391.

7. A fanciful 'science' of allegory was one of the most characteristic devices of the Persian mysticism of the period: Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, p 394.

genius as in the permanent effect upon history which his work achieved. From the time of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, the Ismailis ceased to be harmless and became the most dangerous rivals alike of the decaying regime of the Abbassids – which just about this time began to fall under the barbarous Turkish influence, and of orthodox Sunni Islam. It is necessary, therefore, to glance at his historic role, both as the ultimate founder of the Fatimid Khalifat and as the prototype, forerunner, one might add, stepfather of the sect, or order, of the ‘Assassins’, my proper subject.

Chapter III: The Fatimid Khalifat

About the middle of the ninth century, just at the time when the Abbasid Empire was beginning its decline, there entered the ranks of the 'sect of the seven' a da'is, or propagandist, whose conspiratorial abilities quickly transformed the Ismaili movement from the least into the most dangerous of the enemies of the Abbasid Khalifs and of orthodox (Sunni) Islam. This was Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, the son of an oculist (qaddah). Prior to his death about 873-874, near Emessa in Syria, this man led a wandering life as an agitator, flying from pillar to post and never remaining long at one place. As befits an agitator whose life was one long conspiracy against 'law and order', constituted authority in Church and State, little is known of the details of his life, in the same way that little is known of modern anarchist agitators, whose underground activities form the nearest modern parallel to the careers of these Oriental founders of subversive movements. He was, however, evidently a man of conspiratorial genius who succeeded in both reorganising a hitherto harmless sect and in placing himself at its head with an authority so complete that it survived his death and passed on to his descendants. He even succeeded in inducing the 'sect of the seven' to believe in his own descent from Ali and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, thus becoming the founder of the later Fatimid dynasty.

The methods by means of which Abdullah-ibn-Maymun reorganised the 'sect of the seven' are thus described by a modern authority:

It was an inveterate hatred against the Arabs and Islam which, towards the middle of the third century of the Hegira (that is, 870), suggested to a certain Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, an oculist (qaddah) by profession and a Persian by race, a project as amazing for the boldness and genius with which it was conceived as for the assurance and vigour with which it was carried out.¹

And another modern Orientalist, Reinhart Dozy, in his work on Mohammedan Spain, adds:

To bind together in one association the conquered and the conquerors; to combine in one secret society wherein there should be several grades of initiation, the free thinkers, who saw in religion only a curb for the common people, and the bigots of all sects; to make use of the believers to bring about a reign of unbelievers, and of the conquerors to overthrow the Empire which themselves had founded; to form for himself, in short, a party numerous, compact and schooled to obedience, which, when the moment was come, would give the throne, if not to himself, at least to his descendants; such was the dominant idea of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun; an idea which grotesque and audacious though it was, he realised with astonishing tact, incomparable skill, and a profound knowledge of the human heart.²

1. Michael Jan de Goeje, *Fihrist asma' ar-rigāl wa-'l-qaba'il wa-gàir dālik*, Leiden, 1901, pp 1-87.

2. Reinhart Dozy, *Histoire des Musulmans d'Espagne, jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides (711-1110)*, Volume 3, Leiden, 1861, pp 8-9.

The Dutch Orientalist, De Goeje, adds to this

To attain this end a conjunction of means was devised which may fairly be described as satanic; human weakness was attacked on every side; devoutness was offered to the believing, liberty, not to say licence, to the reckless; philosophy to the strong-minded; mystical hopes to the fanatical and marvels to the common folk. So also a Messiah was presented to the Jews, a paraclete to the Christian, a Mahdi to the Mussulmans, and lastly, a philosophical system to the votaries of Persian and Syrian Paganism. And this system was put in movement with a calm resolve which excites our astonishment, and which, if we could forget the object, would merit our liveliest admiration.³

Who, upon reading the above, would not imagine himself to be hearing an account of the Assassins written by a Frankish chronicler of the Crusades, or a Protestant controversialist describing the activities of the Jesuits in the epoch of the Counter-Reformation, or a modern anti-revolutionary propagandist describing the activities of Russian underground organisations in the days of Michael Bakunin, Lenin and the Communist (Third) International, or an account of Hitler's rise to power?

Indeed, the confusion would not be without some basis in solid historical fact, for (as will be indicated in the third part of the present book), from the underground conspiracy hatched towards the close of the ninth century of the Christian era against the Abbassid Khalifs of Baghdad by that little-known genius, Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, there was destined to flow a vast torrent. Arising originally from this underground spring, a winding but sequent stream of revolution, counter-revolution and conspiracy has flowed. Proceeding from the subsequent success of his descendants, the Fatimid Khalifs of Egypt, the technique of subterranean propaganda and organisation, originally conceived by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, passed over to their offshoots, the Druzes and the Assassins; and affected the Latin Crusaders via the agency of the disciples of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the conspiratorial genius who best understood and improved upon the work of the founder of the Fatimid dynasty.

From the Assassins, the 'science' of conspiracy and of underground organisation invaded the West, and was imparted directly to the Templars by the Syrian Assassins themselves, and, reaching Spain by a circuitous route and by the agency of Muslim Dervishes of a more orthodox character it 'suffered a sea change' and reappeared in the Jesuit Order, which, by means of unscrupulous application of its technique, became itself a great European (and American) power, and changed the course of European history from the sixteenth century onwards. And it is scarcely to be doubted that, however much and bitterly they may have been opposed to the creed and world-philosophy of the order founded by Ignatius Loyola, all the secret societies of modern time, even the most radical and anti-clerical, the Illuminati, the Grand Orient, the Anarchists, even the Communist International itself, their latest avatar, have borrowed their fundamentals in tactics and organisation from, or have been profoundly influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by 'the power and secret of the Jesuits'. Such was the historic sequence which rose from the reformation effected by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun in the mid-ninth century AD.

3. De Goeje, *Fihrist*, pp 187-88.

The theological changes introduced by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun into the Ismaili 'sect of the seven' are summarised thus by an eminent Orientalist:

The sect of Ismailis was primarily a mere subdivision of the Shi'ites, or partisans of Ali, but from the time of Abdullah, surnamed Qaddah, the son of Maymun Qaddah, and chief of the sect towards the year AH 250 (that is, after the Hegira, or Flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622, the starting point of the Muslim chronology), it so greatly diverged from its point of departure that it met with the reprehension of the Shi'ites themselves, who denounced as impious such as would embrace it.⁴

To translate the medieval language of religion into the language of modern revolutionary movements, if the Ismaili 'sect of the seven' represented the Mohammedan analogy to the socialist revolutionary movements of pre-1914 Europe, the reformed sect, from the time of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun onwards, represented the 'Bolshevik' movement of Islam which, as we shall now see, effected its 'Russian Revolution' in Egypt and North Africa, where it set up the Fatimid Khalifat in opposition both to the heretical Umayyad Khalifs of Spain, and to the schismatic Abbassid Khalifs of Baghdad.⁵

Whilst no writings of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun have survived, yet this extraordinary man, like the Russian anarchist Bakunin, to whom I have compared him, evidently possessed a personality of terrific power, which completely dominated the 'sect of seven', for he succeeded in persuading his followers that he was himself a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. As such, he claimed for himself and his descendants the true rank of Khalif, or successor of the Prophet and of his descendant, the seventh Imam, Ismail, whom the sect held to have ascended into heaven; 'not dead, but gone before'.

This tremendous claim was, however, accepted by the sect, which henceforth was led by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun's descendants who, to emphasise their prophetic descent, called themselves 'Fatimids', or descendants of Fatima, the wife of Ali, and the only child of Mohammed to leave issue. Under this title, the descendants of the great revolutionary continued to play an important role in contemporary world affairs right down to their destruction by Saladin three centuries later (1171). The revolutionary oculist had, in fact, founded one of the most famous Mohammedan dynasties.⁶

4. See Stanislas Guyard, *Fragments relatifs à la doctrine des Ismaéliens: texte publié pour la première fois, avec une traduction complète et des notes*, Paris, 1814, p 8.

5. To anticipate the second and third parts of this book, we can pursue this very striking and exact analogy further: for, if Ibn Maymun was, in a sense, the 'Lenin' of Islam, and if his descendants, the Fatimid Khalifs, represented *vis-à-vis* the world of orthodox Islam a kind of 'Third International', like the Comintern of modern times, Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the founder of the Assassins, originally a breakaway from the Fatimid 'International', represented, no less exactly, the 'Trotsky' of Islam, and his movement was the mediaeval 'Fourth International', which defended the original Ismaili faith against its degeneration into Egyptian nationalism, just as Trotsky's followers denounce today the Russian nationalism of Stalin. I may add that this remarkably accurate parallel would seem to demonstrate that the art of revolutionary conspiracy contains permanent elements that invariably repeat themselves in all revolutionary movements. *Vide infra*, Part III.

6. Whether the Fatimids can accurately be styled 'Mohammedan' constitutes a nice point in theology, *viz*: at what point does a heretic, or mis-believer, become an infidel or unbeliever. In the case of the still more dubious Assassins, it would be difficult on any hypothesis to include

The world of medieval Islam was a theocratic world, and the brilliant Muslim civilisation, which was contemporaneous with the Dark Ages in Europe, was itself a theocratic civilisation. Like all such civilisations, from Ancient Egypt to modern Tibet, politics were dominated by religious interest, and culture by theology, the medieval 'queen of the sciences'. The Muslim world, in the days of the Khalifat, represented not so much a combination of Church and State as a Church-State, that is, a union of Church and State in which the power of the latter is derived from that of the former.

In the world of medieval Islam, as in that of mediaeval Europe, the idea of 'religion as a private matter', common both to classical and to modern times, was unknown; indeed, in the case of Islam, more so than that of mediaeval Christianity, since in the former case, unlike the latter, there was no secular power, no Holy Roman Empire, such as existed in mediaeval Europe, to dispute the ascendancy of the Papacy.

In the Muslim world, the Khalif, 'the Commander of the Faithful', wielded an authority absolutely unique and unchallenged in theory and, when the Khalifat was strong, in practice also, over the whole world of Islam, and along the whole length of 'the golden road' across the entire Muslim world and civilisation from Samarkand to Spain.

Even, as in the latter half of the ninth century, when Abdullah-ibn-Maymun reformed the Ismaili sect and founded the Fatimid dynasty, the Khalifat was divided between rival claimants, that is to say the Abbassids in Baghdad, and the Umayyads in Spain – yet neither claimant had in any way abandoned his pretensions to universal sovereignty.

Just as in the decline of the Roman Empire, when the Empire was divided into east and west, yet whoever assumed the title of Khalif, or successor, of the Prophet, assumed therewith his claim to universal authority over the entire Muslim world, both spiritual and temporal. As such, it was a question of '*aut Caesar, aut nihil*'. Either he must make good his claim or perish as a dangerous heretic and rebel. In a theocracy the terms are necessarily identical.

Hence the Fatimid descendants of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun could no longer rest content with the obscure pacifist role of their earlier Ismaili predecessors. To make good their claims they had to become 'enemies of society' – rebels against the powers-that-be. Like those modern Muslim heresiarchs, the Mahdi and the 'Mad Mullah' – the Mullah was 'mad' only because unsuccessful – the Fatimids were driven by the very vastness of their claims to become revolutionaries in the interests of legitimacy! At the end of the ninth century of the Christian era they founded a vast underground movement, the multifarious ramifications of which extended from Khorasan on the edge of Central Asia, to Morocco, on the Western fringe of Africa.

This Fatimid 'International' was indeed not completely successful in overthrowing the status quo in the contemporary Eastern world. Nonetheless, it met with important successes, and eventually founded a powerful dynasty in Egypt and North Africa which became one of the foremost states of its time.

them within the fold of Islam, though they definitely belonged to its culture. *Vide infra*, Part III. I may add that the great Orientalist, Professor EG Browne, examines the claim of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun and his Fatimid descendants to be the lineal descendants of Ali and Fatima and, therefore, of Mohammed, and decides that 'the balance of evidence appears to weigh strongly against it': Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, p 398.

As it is not possible to understand the career of Hasan-ibn-Sabah and the concurrent rise of the Assassins without some comprehension of the peculiar situation to which the Fatimid rise to power led, I can usefully add a brief reference to this celebrated dynasty, which was the direct forerunner of the most enigmatic and terrible sect in human annals, *viz*: the movement founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah.

Chapter IV: The Fatimid Dynasty

The situation in the Muslim world of the late ninth century was one still characterised by cultural brilliance, but the beginnings of political decay were already visible. Leaving aside Spain for the moment, we can note that the Abbassid Khalifat, the ruler of the whole Muslim world except Spain, from the Punjab to Morocco, was degenerating into a dynasty of 'harem-Sultans', political *rois faineants*, to be set up, deposed at will and not infrequently assassinated by their Turkish guards. The great Khalifs of the first century of Abbassid rule, from Al-Mansur to Vathek (750–847), were succeeded by weaklings and men of straw.

Hence, while the Abbassid capital, Baghdad, then and thereafter, right down to its fall before the Tartars in 1258, continued to display much of the cultural and commercial brilliance which had distinguished it in the golden days of 'the Arabian Nights', at the beginning of the ninth century, yet the vast empire of the successors of the Prophet began to show all the marks of coming disintegration.

Even the great Khalifs of the House of Abbas, such as Haroun-al-Raschid (786–809) and Al-Mamun (809–833), had not found it an easy matter to hold together their enormous empire. Spain had already gone at the very commencement of the Abbassid rule, and as the Prerogatives of 'the Commander of the Faithful' were increasingly usurped by barbarous Turkish mercenaries — as inept at government, religion or anything else except war, as Turks have down to our own day usually demonstrated themselves to be — the fabric of the vast empire became loosened, and the more distant provinces began to fall away.

In a theocracy only the sacred person of the divinely-elected ruler holds the empire together; and in any case, the heterogeneous empire of the Khalifs had been won only by the sword, and its numerous component nations were held together only by their devotion to the religion so successfully spread by their conquerors. As, therefore, the moral and political prestige of the Khalifat declined, *pari passu*, the Abbassid Empire declined with it.

In fact, while, as we shall have occasion to observe later on in the course of this book, if the finishing blow to the Abbassids and to the Khalifat was given in 1258 by barbarian invasion, yet, as in the similar case of the Roman Empire at an earlier date, the barbarians only accomplished the drastic 'fall' after a long precedent 'decline' had undermined the foundations of the empire; Jenghiz Khan and Hulagu only finishing off a decrepit empire, already hopelessly weakened by internal military violence and by inherent political disunity and decay. The student of classical history will recognise an exactly similar role in the relations of the already tottering Roman Empire of the fifth century in the era of the barbarian invasions, the so-called 'migration of the nations'.

From the time of Vathek onwards, the Abbassid empire began to disintegrate. Persia and Central Asia fell away to local dynasties of Persian origin, the most famous of which, that founded a little later by Mahmud of Ghazni (997–1032), built up a great Muslim empire in India. Local dynasties seized power in Egypt and North Africa. In Arabia a robber-state was set up by the Carmathians, originally a religious sect and a breakaway from the Ismaili movement of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun. The Carmathians openly defied the authority of the Khalifs, pushed their ravages up to the very gates of the metropolis, Baghdad itself, and, to the horror of all Islam, sacked the caravans of pilgrims, putting to the sword their unfortunate inmates, who

were discharging the religious duty of pilgrimage to the sacred cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, the performance of which is the most sacred religious duty incumbent on every Muslim. Eventually, to the unutterable horror of all Islam, the Carmathians sacked Mecca, the Holy City, and carried off the Ka'aba, the Black Stone, then and now the centre of Muslim devotion (January 930). Meanwhile, in Baghdad itself, the prestige of the Khalifat sank lower and lower, the successors of the Prophet being reduced to the status of powerless pensioners of their Turkish guards, whose chief assumed the arrogant title of 'Prince of Princes' (934), and enacted the role of a Japanese 'shōgun' or Frankish 'Mayor of the Palace', setting up and deposing his state prisoners, the nominal Khalifs, at will.¹

Of all the dangers that threatened the declining Abbassid Khalifat, the most menacing one proved to be that represented by the Fatimids, who combined a tolerably legal claim to the throne, conjoined with a superb underground organisation, designed by a propagandist of genius who ranks unquestionably as a past master of the conspiratorial art. For the descendants of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun evidently enjoyed a fair share of their great ancestor's gifts in this conspiratorial genre. On their behalf there worked with tireless zeal a vast propaganda organisation which, inflamed both by the hope of paradise and by hopes of more mundane rewards, permeated every section of the vast disjointed Abbassid empire.

In a political edifice so unstable as the Abbassid empire increasingly was, it was only a matter of time before the wily serpent of discontent could find an opportune crevice through which to penetrate into the Abbassid garden of Eden. In the course of a single generation, the Fatimid dynasty made good some part at least of its claims and emerged from the obscurity of underground conspiracy, in which the founder of the dynasty had spent his entire career, into the plenitude of power and the glare of history.

In Asia itself, the centre of the Abbassid rule, the authority of the Khalifs, or rather, of their Turkish 'Mayors of the Palace', proved too strong to be overthrown by the Fatimid propaganda. In the distant provinces of Africa, remote from the centres of Abbassid civilisation, the weak links in the chain of Abbassid rule soon disclosed themselves. Whereas of the two immediate successors of Ibn-Maymun, Mohammed continued to lead the underground life characteristic of Ibn-Maymun and Ahmed, their father and grandfather respectively, their third successor was able

1. See Arthur Gilman, *The Story of the Saracens: From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Bagdad*, London, 1887, p 426. The founder of the Carmathian gang or sect — either name would apply — was one Hamdan, known as Qarmath, or 'the short'. He was a disciple of Abdullah-ibn-Maynun, the founder of the Fatimid dynasty; and the Carmathians, in theory, were adherents of the Fatimids, on whose behalf they waged a guerrilla warfare as freelancers. As, however, they seem to have acted pretty generally in their own interest, the term 'robber state' seems applicable. While this book is not concerned with Spain, which lay outside the orbit of the Assassins and of their forerunners here described, yet to round off the picture of the contemporary Muslim world I may add that the decline and eventual downfall of the brilliant Umayyad civilisation in Spain, dubiously described as 'Moorish' — followed in general outline the course of the Abbassid Khalifat, *viz*: it was first weakened by internal decay and disintegration, and by the similar rule of barbaric mercenaries — in this case Moors from the Sahara, the Almoravids — before being finished off between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries by the Christian Spaniards, who also may be termed barbarians, at any rate by comparison with the brilliant Arab civilisation of Spain. See Joseph McCabe, *The Splendour of Moorish Spain*, London, 1935. The 'Moors' maintained a foothold in Spain until 1492 — when their last stronghold, Granada, surrendered — but after the thirteenth century their power only existed on sufferance.

to carve out for his dynasty a principality in North Africa, which formed the beginning of the powerful Fatimid empire. This prince, Said Ibn-al-Husayn, born in 873, the year before Abdullah-ibn-Maymun's death – established a kingdom in Africa, the beginning of which Professor EG Browne describes as follows:

To him at length was it granted to reap the fruits of the ambitious schemes devised and matured by his predecessors. In AH 297 (909), learning from his da'is [propagandist; see next chapter – FAR] Aba'Abdullah that the Berbers in North Africa were impregnated with the Ismaili doctrines and were eagerly expecting the coming of the Imam, he crossed over thither, declaring himself to be the great-grandson of Mohammed-ibn-Ismail and the promised Mahdi; took the name of the Abu Mohammed 'Ubaydu'llah, placed himself at the head of his enthusiastic partisans, overthrew the Aghlabid' dynasty, conquered the greater portion of North Africa, and with the newly founded city of Mahdiyya for his capital, established the dynasty which, because of the claim which it maintained of descent from Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, is known as the Fatimid. Sixty years later, AH 356 (963), Egypt was wrested by them from the Ikhshid dynasty, and at the end of the tenth century of our era most of Syria was in their hands. This great Shi'ite power was represented by fourteen anti-Caliphs, and was finally extinguished by Saladin (Sala-u'd-din) in AH 567 (1171).²

As the Ismaili, self-styled 'Fatimid' Khalifat of Egypt represented the immediate starting point of the movement of the Assassins, a glance may usefully be directed at this dynasty, one of the most powerful and famous in medieval history. At its height, during the long and brilliant reign of the eighth Khalif, Al-Mustansir (1036–94), the empire of the Fatimids was probably the richest and most cultured state in the entire world and, during its prime, easily surpassed its orthodox Muslim competitors. Whilst the Christian West still struggled painfully upwards from the barbarism into which it had sunk throughout the Dark Age that followed upon the fall of the Roman Empire, and whilst the orthodox (Sunni) Muslim world in Asia and Europe was overrun by the barbarous Turks and (Christian) Spaniards – the forerunners of the yet more terrible Tartars – the Fatimid empire represented an oasis of wealth, culture and toleration under the mild and equitable administration of what appears to have been an executive of outstanding merit.³

2. See Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, London, 1902, pp 397–08. See note 8 on 'The Mahdi'.

3. The only exception to the above seems to have been constituted by the sixth Khalif, Al-Hakim (996–1021) – a homicidal lunatic, half-Russian by blood, who appears to have combined the cruelties of a Nero with the freakishness of a Caligula. By a peculiar irony redolent of the mysticism inherent in the times, this Caliban-like creature, who seems to have been amoral rather than immoral, became the divinity of a religious sect which still endures, the Druses of the Lebanon, founded by Al-Hakim's Persian Minister, Hamsa-Ud-Durusi. The Druses still adore this red-haired lunatic in expectation of his second coming as the Mahdi or Messiah.

This freakish episode did not, however, permanently affect the stability of the Fatimid regime, the cultural influence of which extended to Europe via Sicily, which was for a time included into the Fatimid Empire. Sicily for long vied with Arabic Spain as the most civilised country in Europe, and under its Norman kings in the twelfth century, acted as a conduit for the diffusion of Oriental ideas in Europe which culminated in the amazing renaissance of European civilisation in the thirteenth century, of which the great neo-Mohammedan emperor,

Two quotations from a modern and contemporary writer may usefully be cited to bear testimony to the wealth and splendour of the Fatimid regime in Egypt during its prime.

The great Fatimid propagandist and Persian poet, Nasir-i-Khusraw, who was in Cairo in the middle of the eleventh century, during the reign of the eighth Khalif, Ali-Mustansir, in the palmiest period of the Fatimid rule, records his impressions thus: it may be added that he enjoyed the unbounded confidence of his contemporaries for veracity and sincere candour:

Everyone has perfect confidence in the Sultan, and no one stands in fear of his myrmidons and spies, relying on the Sultan to oppress no one and to covet no one's possessions. There I saw wealth belonging to private individuals such that if I would speak of it or describe it the people of Persia would refuse to credit my statements. I could neither limit nor define their wealth, and nowhere have I seen such prosperity as I saw there. There I saw a Christian who was one of the richest men in Egypt, so that it was said that his ships, his wealth and his estates surpassed computation. My object in mentioning him is that one year the water of the Nile fell short and corn became dear. The Sultan's Wazir summoned this Christian and said: 'The year is not good, and the Sultan's heart is weighed down with anxiety for his people. How much corn could you supply, either for a price or as a loan?' The Christian answered, 'Thanks to the fortunate auspices of the Sultan and the Wazir [minister – FAR], I have in store so much corn that I could supply all Egypt with bread for six years.' Now the population of Egypt at this time was certainly at the lowest computation five times that of Nishapur [the writer's native province in Persia – FAR], and anyone versed in statistics will readily understand what vast wealth one must possess to hold corn to such an amount, and what security of property and good government a people must enjoy amongst whom such things are possible, and what great riches; and withal neither did the Sultan oppress or wrong anyone, nor did his subjects keep anything hidden or concealed.

After citing the above, Professor Browne very aptly comments:

It does not appear that Nasir-i-Khusraw had embraced the Ismaili doctrine before he made his journey to Egypt and the West, and we may fairly assume that the admirable example presented to other governments of that period by the Fatimids had no inconsiderable effect on his conversion to those views of which, till the end of his long life, he was so faithful an adherent and so earnest an exponent.⁴

Another modern Orientalist observes, regarding the internal regimes of the Fatimids:

The [Ismaili] doctrines were publicly taught in Cairo in universities richly endowed and provided with libraries where crowds assembled to listen

Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250), the 'anti-Christ' of the medieval era, was the powerful leader, and of which his Sicilian capital, Palermo, was the cultural centre.

4. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, pp 400–01.

to the most distinguished professors. The principle of the sect being that men must be converted by persuasion, the greatest tolerance was shown towards other creeds. Mu'izz [the fourth Fatimid Khalif, reigned 952–975], permitted Christians to dispute openly with his doctors, a thing hitherto unheard of, and Severus, a celebrated Christian bishop, availed himself of this authorisation.

The learned author proceeds to give other striking examples of the tolerant and beneficent character of Fatimid rule.⁵

And yet another Orientalist concludes that:

It is certainly wrong to confound, as do the Muslim doctors, all these sects in one common reprobation. Thus, the disappearance of the Fatimids, who brought about the triumph of the Ismaili religion in Egypt, concluded an era of prosperity, splendour and toleration such as the East will never again enjoy.⁶

In the middle of the eleventh century the Fatimid Khalifat stood at the height of its power. The great Khalif, Al-Mustansir, ruled an empire in the front rank, perhaps at the very head, of all contemporary Muslim states. Moreover, we must never, of course, allow ourselves to be ensnared by a false accidental perspective, so as to ignore or minimise the vast superiority of Eastern over Western civilisation throughout the epoch which we have under review.

Hitherto, the recorded sequence of civilisations has oscillated in alternate movement between East and West. From the seventh to the twelfth century was the golden age of Muslim civilisation; compared with the contemporary Dark Age in Europe this civilisation shone, from India to Spain, with a blaze of light and glory. In that splendid constellation of civilisation the Fatimid khalif occupied probably the foremost place. Compared to the magnificent court of Al-Mustansir, the contemporary Western, Frankish potentates, such as William the Conqueror of England and Henry IV of Germany, cut rustic and sorry figures. The retreat of Islam before its age-long Christian rival, to be inaugurated by the Crusades at the end of the century, had not yet begun. In the brilliant sky of civilisation the crescent moon of Islam still burned with undiminished splendour, dominating the contemporary skies of wealth and culture.

The power of the Fatimid dynasty may be gathered from the size of its army; that sad but accurate index, in a world of power politics, of the greatness of states. The careful contemporary traveller cited above computes the strength of this at 215,000 men; an enormous total for a medieval army, and this was a standing army, not a mere feudal levy, as were the armies of contemporary Europe. When one reflects that the average field army in contemporary Europe numbered from 5000 to 10,000 men, a number rarely exceeded even in the most sanguinary and famous of European battles throughout the Middle Ages, the enormous power of the Fatimid Khalifs becomes at once apparent. The same eye-witness records that Cairo, the Fatimid capital, far surpassed all the most celebrated cities of the East, most of which Nasir-i-Khusraw had himself visited.

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5. Stanislas Guyard, *Un grand Maître des Assassins au Temps de Saladin*, Paris, 1877, pp 14–15 of the *tirage-a-part*.
 6. See René Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis*, Paris, 1900, p 49.

The successors of the great conspirator, Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, had become mighty kings and wielded the vast financial and military resources of a great empire, besides still holding in their hands the threads of the vast conspiracy which was represented by the underground propaganda organisations of the Ismailis, that permeated the whole of Muslim Asia as far as Khorasan and the great cities of Central Asia on the Oxus, and on the edge of the deserts which formed the extreme limit of the Muslim universe. Along 'the golden road to Samarkand' there plied industriously not only the caravans of merchants, but also the da'is or propagandists of the Ismaili Imam, who was the self-same person as the Fatimid ruler of Egypt.⁷

The dual roles of the Fatimids, however, eventually proved embarrassing. At one and the same time they were the rulers of a great empire, embracing at its peak North Africa, Syria and Sicily besides its metropolitan centre, Egypt. They were also the Imams, the spiritual and temporal chiefs of vast revolutionary and conspiratorial organisations designed to overthrow the Abbassid empire and to subvert the existing order in Church and State. The position of an autocrat who is, at the same time, a revolutionary is clearly difficult! The two roles scarcely run congruously in double harness.

Here again, since conspiracy is a kind of science, having permanent and unchangeable rules, we can find an instructive parallel to the situation described above in the modern history of the Russian Revolution since the death of Lenin (21 January 1924). This parallel was obviously not available in 1818, when Baron von Hammer-Purgstall wrote his history of the Assassins, nor, it may be added, was he the man to use it if it had been, but it will be found to shed a great deal of light on the origin of the Assassins as there seems little doubt that it was from this basic incongruity between these two positions that the sect of the Assassins arose, in order to carry on the revolutionary propaganda which the Ismailis proper (that is, the international organisation founded by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun and presided over by his Fatimid descendants) were no longer capable of performing effectually on account of their preoccupation with the national problems of their Egyptian empire.

7. The power of the Fatimids, as exemplified by the figure quoted above, may be illustrated by the contemporary figures for the armies of the great European potentates of that era. Alfred the Great of England, a contemporary of the early Fatimids, has been estimated as possessing an army of at most 5000 men. William the Conqueror, a contemporary of Al-Mustansir, won the decisive battle of Hastings, which changed the course of English history, with an army calculated by the greatest military historian of modern times, at about 7000 men. Frederick Hohenstaufen II, the medieval 'Wonder of the World', won his greatest battle, Cortenuova, in 1237 with at most an army of between 10,000 and 15,000 men. And Frederick was ruler of Italy, Sicily and Germany, and was the most brilliant, and probably the richest European ruler of the entire Middle Ages. One of his most famous predecessors, Otto the Great, in the tenth century, invaded France with an army of seven legions, the largest of which is reported by a contemporary as numbering 1000 men! Compare the figures with the figures given by the eyewitness Nasir-i-Khusraw, for the Fatimid army', viz: 35,000 cavalry from North Africa, 50,000 Arabs, 30,000 of mixed race. For the infantry, 20,000 black troops from North Africa, 30,000 Nubian and Sudanese, 10,000 Asiatics, 30,000 Negroes from Central Africa, and 10,000 mercenary guards. Such comparative figures are eloquent testimony to the tremendous power of the Fatimids when compared with the most powerful rulers of medieval Europe. See Reverend De Lacy O'Leary, *Short History of the Fatimid Khalifat*, London, 1923, p 199; and for the European figures quoted above, Professor Hans Delbruck, *Numbers in History*, London, 1913; and Professor Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second: Wonder of the World 1194-1250*, New York, 1927.

Conspiracy is, after all, a whole time occupation! It is, in any case, incompatible with the effective exercise of governmental functions. This truth, as we shall now see, became evident in the case of the Ismaili revolutionaries in the eleventh century, and the same truth has again been rediscovered by the Russian Bolshevik revolutionaries, in our own century.

Accordingly, a glance at the international position of the Ismaili propaganda may usefully be directed before concluding a brief but absolutely necessary survey of the forerunners of the Assassins, which forms the indispensable preliminary to my proper subject, the history and the technique of terror of the Assassins themselves, the proper subject of the second and third parts of this book.⁸

8. Note on the Mahdi: In his book on the Saracens, Professor Arthur Gilman tells us:

It seems pretty certain that Mohammed declared to Ali, though it is not recorded in the Koran, that at some time in the future there was to arise a Mahdi, one directed by God (Allah) who should be in his line, destined to bring justice into the world, a sort of saviour. The name Mahdi came into history at about 685 in the reign of Abd-el-Malik [that is, the fourth Umayyad Khalif, 694-705 – FAR], when Moktar made his desperate onslaught upon the Khalif and met his overwhelming defeat. From that time, however, the idea of a coming Mahdi spread until it was well established in Persia, Africa, Turkey, Egypt and in our own time in the Sudan, where it brought about the death of Gordon – Gilman, *The Story of the Saracens*, p 414.

The Shi'ites looked forward to the coming of Ali or one of his descendants as the expected Mahdi. The Ismailis (that is, the Fatimids), the 'left wing' of the Shi'ite sect, believed that he had actually come in the person of Ismail, the seventh Imam or spiritual successor of Ali. Hence their nickname, the 'sect of the seven'. The Fatimid Khalif was regarded as his Imam, or representative on earth.

The whole fascinating subject of the place of the Mahdi in Muslim history and theology has been exhaustively treated by the eminent French Orientalist, James Darmesteter, *Le Mahdi: depuis les origines de L'Islam jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, 1885; English translation James Darmesteter, *The Mahdi: Past and Present*, New York, 1885.

Chapter V: The Fatimid International

We have seen that the Fatimid successors of Ibn-Maymun rose in the course of two centuries from the leadership of an underground conspiracy against the Abbassid empire and the Muslim (Sunni) orthodox church to the status of a great power in their contemporary world. In fact, the Ismaili sect had 'arrived' in the sense of worldly prosperity. How great this prosperity was we may infer from the following description of the wealth and splendour of the Fatimid regime given by a modern historian. Speaking of the Fatimid Khalifat, Dr FW Bussell writes:

Its wealth was enormous. The Caliphs lived in pontifical seclusion behind the walls of the Cairene citadel in the guarded city, taking no part in a government which they wholly abandoned to their ministers. Sacks of emeralds, crystal cups, thousands of silver goblets, works of art and priceless embroideries were seen there: princesses left behind fabulous fortunes and intrigued in affairs of state. Great industrial activity prevailed. The manufacture of art and pottery, of woollens and silk, were brought to high perfection.¹

It is evident that the position of a Fatimid ruler, described above, was hardly compatible with the role of a daring and efficient conspirator. In fact, the conspiratorial genius of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, which had been present in his early descendants and had raised the dynasty from obscurity to power and luxury, had been stifled in the meshes of this gorgeous court, so utterly incompatible with fanaticism or indeed with any strong emotion. Indeed, in his monumental work, quoted above, Dr FW Bussell adds:

Strangely enough, there was no safeguard for public order in a genuine religious devotion; the better classes were of alien race and faith and the populace had no real sympathy with Fatimite claims. Nor had the Caliphs themselves any profound convictions or belief in their rights.²

Nonetheless, the *roi-faineant* of Cairo still filled by right of hereditary succession from Abdullah-ibn-Maymun — nominally from Ali and Fatima — the role of Ismaili pontiff and head of the vast underground organisation of the Ismailis in Asia. That the very success of the regime in Egypt militated against its success as a militant revolutionary movement on the international scale appears virtually self-evident. A Sardanapalus is scarcely cast for the role of a Catiline, the luxurious court of an Elagabalus scarcely affords an ideal training ground for a Guy Fawkes! That the Ismaili propaganda in Asia languished under such an epicurean leadership and that scientific conspirators and fanatical Ismaili zealots alike groaned under such a (mis)leadership can well be imagined. The inevitable split came at the end of the eleventh century.

What was the nature of the Ismaili doctrine so zealously propagated throughout all Western Asia by the zealous da'is, or propagandists, of the Ismaili

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1. FW Bussell, *Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages*, London, 1918, p 358. NB: The title of the Muslim 'pope' can be spelt impartially as Khalif or Caliph.
 2. Bussell, *Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages*, p 359.

sect? In general one can accurately style it as the 'left wing' – in modern political parlance – of the Shi'ite movement, of which it represented a development. The doctrine of the Shi'ites has already been summarised by Professor Browne. We have not forgotten that essentially it stood for 'the principle of Divine Right as against the principle of democratic election'.

The learned author proceeds to enumerate the specific additions made by the Ismailis to the Shi'ite doctrine described above. These doctrines, which centred upon the belief in reincarnation and a complicated symbolism of numerical values, are today unintelligible, at any rate to a Western reader, and may therefore be omitted. (The curious can find this intricate system of theosophy described in detail in Professor Browne's great work on Persian culture, cited above).³

This conspiratorial creed, which threatened the foundations of both Church and State in a theocracy, such as was the Abbassid empire, was spread by the da'is, or propagandists, of the Ismaili sect; the da'is, an important figure generally for the history of the medieval Orient, and particularly for the subject of this book. For the da'is was the agitator who bore the burden and heat of the day. On his shoulders fell the full brunt of the persecuting activities of both outraged orthodoxy and menaced secular interests, frequently compelling the propagandists of rebellion and heresy to live a shadowy life, in constant flight, flitting continually from place to place.

This important and remarkable figure is thus described in the work already quoted:

A few words must be said about the da'is, or propagandists. The type of this characteristically Persian figure seems scarcely to have varied from the time of Abu Muslim to the present day, when the da'is of the Baha'is⁴ still goes forth on his perilous missions between Persia, his native land, and Syria, where his spiritual leaders dwell in exile. These men I have described from personal experience in another book, and I have often pleased myself with the thought that it is almost as though I had seen with my own eyes Abu Muslim, Abdullah-ibn-Maymun al Qaddah, Hamdan Qarmat, and other heroes of the Abbassid and Ismaili propaganda. But if the type of da'is is, so far as we can judge, almost unvarying in Western Asia, it differs very greatly from that of the European missionary, whose learning, knowledge of character and adaptability to circumstances fall short by as much as his material needs and national idiosyncrasies exceed those of the da'is.⁵

It will be sufficiently clear from the above description that by the end of the eleventh century, when new perils fell thick and fast upon the Muslim world, there can have been little sympathy or contact between men living lives so utterly remote from each other as the hard-working, self-sacrificing missionary, living a life of continual hardship and danger, and a gorgeous Egyptian sultan, his Khalif, Imam and nominal chief, living a life of riotous and frequently swinish luxury, and immersed, even when seriously occupied, in the national problems of the Egyptian state.

3. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, London, 1902, pp 405-15.

4. A modern Persian heretical sect. [The brutal treatment of the Baha'is continues today at the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini's followers: note by editors to 1988 edition.]

5. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 1, p 410. The writer goes on to describe the various subterfuges, professional disguises, etc, which the da'is adopted to further his ends.

In any case, the historical roles of a secular autocrat and of the chief of an underground plot, at once conspiratorial and mystical, are, I repeat, fundamentally incompatible. That is, one cannot indefinitely suppress rebellion at home and encourage it abroad. At all events, either to rule a great empire or to lead an international conspiracy is a whole-time job; neither is, surely, a spare-time occupation. Hence one or other occupation must go.

At the end of the eleventh century the inevitable parting of the ways occurred in the evolution of what I may perhaps term the Ismaili revolution. The Fatimid Khalifs became, fundamentally at any rate, Egyptian nationalists, concerned with the problems peculiar to their status as secular rulers, concerned primarily with the defence of Egypt against the new danger from the West that was represented by the Latin Crusaders who took Jerusalem in 1099. As effective leaders of an international revolutionary movement which threatened the established order in Church and State the Fatimids thereafter ceased to function.

Their place was taken by a new 'International', one freed from dynastic cares and secular preoccupations, and devoted simply and solely to the single-minded pursuit of its terrorist and revolutionary aims.

This movement was represented by a new sect or order that arose in the final quarter of the eleventh century. It represented an offshoot, a breakaway from the orthodox heresy of the Ismaili (Fatimid) Khalifs of Egypt, and appeared on the historical stage in the first place as the 'extreme wing of the Ismaili movement', freed from the dead hand of the effete Fatimid kings.

This new movement was the 'Fourth International' of the Muslim East (*vide infra*). It was freed from all worldly cares and secular ambitions: it existed for one end alone: revolutionary terror; and its whole organisation, its entire *mise-en-scène*, was adapted to that end and that end alone. It was, I repeat, a revolutionary organisation, a permanent conspiracy, a terrorist movement pure and simple, the most terrible and sinister in all history. Its founder and leader was no *roi-faineant*, no royal man of straw, but a professional revolutionary, a trained *da'is*, a man of iron, in whom, rather than in his own degenerate Fatimid descendants, the conspiratorial genius of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun was renewed, and more than renewed.

For the founder of the new sect was Hasan-ibn-Sabah, and the sect itself soon acquired a distinctive and sinister soubriquet. Under the appellation 'Assassins', the name and fame of the order founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah has gone round the world, adorning the lurid annals of the race by its action, and the etymology of all languages by its name.

To the history and technique of this new order – the most sinister, the most terrible and – with perhaps one exception, its Jesuit offspring – the most effective and most feared of all underground organisations, the rest of this book will now be addressed.

This explanation of the origin of the Assassins, necessarily unknown to their older historians, is, I suggest in the light of all the known circumstances, by far the most reasonable and probable explanation of the origin of the movement of revolutionary terrorism that was founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah in the closing year of the eleventh century of the Christian era: the fifth of the Muslim chronology.

The first part of the present book – 'The Forerunners of the Assassins' – may be summarised thus. In the early part of the seventh century of the Christian era there arose a man of religious and political genius, Mohammed, who arrived upon the Arab scene at the opportune historical moment when the Arab nation,

immemorially divided into separate clans, felt an overwhelming urge towards expansion into the outside world, for the achievement of which end some measure of political unity was absolutely necessary. This necessary unity was provided by the 'totalitarian' creed of Islam, which simultaneously welded the Arab nation into a political unity and inflamed it with religious zeal against the non-Arabic world.

Thus the Jihad, or Holy War, proclaimed by Islam was impelled by three of the strongest motives which can stir a race of energetic semi-barbarians, such as were the seventh-century Arabs, to deeds of daring and to bold aggressive enterprises: *viz*: love of God and assurance of heavenly reward, ambition to conquer more fertile lands, and desire to plunder richer and more civilised peoples. I may add that Mohammed evidently understood his countrymen very well indeed. For this reason, and unlike the majority of prophets, he did not remain 'without honour' in his own land, but died as master of Arabia.

After the Prophet's death (632 – ten years after the Hegira, or Flight from Mecca to Medina), the newly formed Arabic nation hurled itself against the outside world in the name of Islam, and to the tune of the battle cry: 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet.' Impelled onward by the formidable combination of causes alluded to above, and concentrating upon the task of expansion the whole of their long pent-up force, the Arab armies achieved in three-quarters of a century the conquest of an enormous empire stretching from Provence to India, and raising Islam itself from a purely Arab cult to the status of a 'world' religion. In the course of this marvellous expansion, and under the leadership, so we may surmise, of some of the most daring and resourceful fighters in all history, the Arabs overthrew a whole congerie of decadent civilisations in East and West and infusing the exhausted culture forms of the surrounding nations with their native tempestuous energy, laid the necessary foundations of a new civilisation.⁶

The first revolutionary phase of Islam was followed by a period of political and religious reaction but of great cultural activity. Under the Umayyad Khalifs (660–750), who were descendants of Mohammed's worst enemies, the Koreish clan of Mecca, and who were themselves half pagan in their outlook, the original puritan rigour and fanaticism of Islam disappeared, and its place was taken by a brilliant but worldly civilisation. This civilisation, one of the great civilisations of world history, arose from the admixture of primitive Arab vigour with the decadent civilisations of Hellenism and the Magian East.

The rule of the Umayyads did not meet with universal acceptance in the world of Islam. In particular, it was opposed by the surviving blood relations of Mohammed himself; especially by the descendants of Fatima, the Prophet's only child to leave issue, and of her husband Ali, the third Khalif, whose dynasty had been overthrown by the Umayyads (660–661). The descendants of Ali received strong support, particularly in Persia, where the indigenous belief in hereditary right was strong, and into whose former royal family – the Sassanid dynasty – the descendants of Ali had married. Hosein, the son of Ali, rose in armed revolt against the second Umayyad Khalif, Yazid, and from his martyrdom at Kerbela (10 October 680) dates the great Mohammedan split between the Sunni, or orthodox Muslim

6. While we have no contemporary records of the Arab conquest, it would seem that the leading role was played by Umar, or Omar, the second Khalif, the great War Minister, the 'Carnot' of Islam. Like Carnot, the great War Minister of the French Revolution, the Arab leader was a mighty 'organiser of victory'.

Church, and the Shi'a (faction), the adherents of the hereditary claims of the house of Ali to the Khalifat.

Thenceforward the adherents of Ali were in open opposition to the Umayyad Khalifs. Nevertheless, when the latter were at last overthrown, their place was taken, not by the Alids, but by the collateral but hostile Abbassid dynasty, whose general, Abu Muslim, led the revolution – in 750 – which again drove the descendants of Ali into opposition. At first, the tremendous power of the early Abbasids prevented any open revolt against their authority, and the opposition, driven underground, split into two sects: the 'sect of the twelve', who acknowledged twelve divinely ordained descendants of Ali, and the 'sect of seven', who acknowledged only seven, from the last of whom, Ismail, the sect received the name of 'Ismaili'. Whereas the former sect maintained a pacifist role and sunk into obscurity, the latter was reorganised in the second half of the ninth century by a conspirator of genius, and thereafter was able to play an important role in contemporary history.

The real founder of the Ismaili movement was Abdullah-ibn-Maymun (died 874), who originated a formidable revolutionary movement by the introduction of a new technique of underground organisation and revolt. This remarkable man was the real founder of the Ismaili power, and little as we know of him directly, we are fully justified in recognising in him one of the great conspirators of history. He persuaded his credulous followers that he was the descendant of Ali and Fatima, and, therefore, of the Prophet; and his descendants, the (self-styled) Fatimids, were enabled to build up a powerful kingdom in North Africa (908) and Egypt (960–1171) and, in opposition to the orthodox Abbasids, to make good their claim as Khalifs over a large section of the Mohammedan world. (From the orthodox – Sunni – standpoint, the Fatimids represented, of course, anti-Khalifs, or anti-popes.)

The historic role of the Ismaili movement is thus summarised by Dr HF Helmolt in the course of his valuable summary of world history:

The Fatimid conquest of Egypt, which took place during the course of the tenth century, was only a part, although perhaps the most important part, of a great religious-political sectarian movement that spread rapidly during those times of confusion in opposition to the Khalifs [that is, the Abbasids – FAR]. They consciously endeavoured through the blending of Islamite, Zoroastrian and Christian elements to create a new world religion; thus they were ensured a prominent position and countless adherents, during a time when the orthodox form of Mohammedanism seems to have lost all its power of obtaining new adherents, as well as to have forfeited the confidence of the masses owing to its alliance with the unpopular Abbassid Khalifs... The great danger to which the Khalifat was exposed by this movement lay in the fact that owing to the wide diffusion of its doctrines the dissatisfied of all sects and parties assembled under the Ismailite banner; nor was its propaganda confined to the Iranians alone, as was that of the true Shi'ites.⁷

Towards the end of the eleventh century, however, as we will not have forgotten, the Fatimid Khalifat entered upon its decline; and the descendants of the great conspirator, Ibn Maymun, 'underwent a sea change' and degenerated into god kings, sacrosanct 'Mikados' who, immured within the walls of their magnificent

7. HF Helmolt, *The World's History*, Volume 3, London, 1904, p 342.

palaces, became absolutely unfit for the direction of a vast revolutionary propaganda. If, proverbially, 'adventures are to the adventurous', so conspiracies require equally the direction of conspirators. This direction the Fatimid 'harem Sultans' were increasingly unable to give.

Such a direction, however, became increasingly imperative as the eleventh century (of the Christian era – the fifth of the Muslim chronology) drew towards its close. For it was precisely at this moment that the golden age of Muslim civilisation – which, for all its crimes, was represented by the era of the Umayyad and Abbassid Khalifs (661–750 – excluding Spain, where their rule lasted to about 1000, and in the case of the Abbassids – 750–1258) drew towards its end, and when the shadow of approaching doom fell athwart the sky of Islam. Simultaneously the Muslim world reeled beneath the ferocious assault of the Latin Crusaders, who took Jerusalem in 1099 and set up Christian states in Syria, Trans-Jordania and Palestine; and the hardly less ferocious Seljuk Turks, who, about the same time overran Western Asia, took Baghdad and made the Abbassid Khalif their state prisoner (1059).

Meanwhile in that stark no man's land, the great deserts that divided the Muslim world from the ancient pagan empire of China, there arose a dark cloud which as yet, 'no larger than a man's hand', was destined in less than a century to grow into the most terrible hurricane of destruction that the world had ever known: within a single generation the locust flight of the all-destroying squadrons of Jenghiz Khan, 'the world conqueror', was destined to strew the centres of Eastern civilisation with those ghastly monuments of savage architecture – Tartar style – towering pyramids of shimmering skulls. Within a single generation and in a holocaust of destruction as yet unequalled in recorded human annals, the great civilisation of Muslim Asia was to be swept into oblivion, one that 'left not a wrack behind'.

'Coming events cast their shadows before them.' Before the storm from the steppes had broken, the Franks were already hammering at the gates of Jerusalem, presaging the end – a disaster to civilisation fully comparable to that represented in European history by the fall of the Roman Empire. Islam was sick, the golden bough of its splendid culture was already drooping beneath the weight of its over-luscious fruit, and Islamic culture was already world-weary; it longed for annihilation: it sought to swoon into the Infinite. Its very triumph turned to ashes, to 'Dead Sea fruit'.

This world-weariness, the nemesis of an over-ripe civilisation, which defeats itself by its very successes, found expression about this time (end of eleventh century) in lines of unsurpassed poignancy uttered by a poet-astronomer of Nishapur, in the very heart of the brilliant Persian culture:

Think, in this batter'd caravanserai,
Whose doorways are alternate night and day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his pomp,
Abode his hour or two, and went his way.
One moment in annihilation's waste,
One moment of the well of life to taste –
The stars are setting, and the caravan,
Starts for the dawn of nothing.

– Oh make haste!⁸

For the civilisation of Islam, that ‘dawn’ was near, though Omar Khayyam and his contemporaries were mercifully spared the knowledge of its proximity. The ‘dawn of nothing’ was, for the man of Asiatic Islam, the Tartar hordes of Jenghiz Khan and his descendants. But the Frank and the Turk were already thundering at the gate whilst Omar Khayyam discoursed on human mutability. All Islam shuddered. Evidently in the Arabic Empire, as in the Roman before it, the ‘decline’ preceded the ‘fall’.

‘The animal is wicked: when attacked it defends itself!’ Threatened on all sides by enemies, the Ismailite revolution retired tortoise-wise into its shell. It encased itself in an armour of fear, it defended itself by a technique of terror.⁹ For at precisely this moment there stepped across the threshold of history a man and a movement unsurpassed in the secrecy of their movements and unequalled in the terror that they excited.

My preliminary but necessary survey now concluded, I introduce the founder, Hasan-ibn-Sabah; the master conspirator of all history; I present the Assassins.

8. *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, the Astronomer-Poet of Persia*, translated by Edward Fitzgerald, London, 1859.

9. Revolutionary movements follow the same pattern so closely that it has been found possible to forecast the course of one with considerable accuracy (*vide infra*). Although the literature belonging to the Assassins has entirely, and that of the Ismailis largely, perished, it is possible by modern analogy to divine something of the circumstances attending the origin of the Assassins.

When the Russian revolution broke out in 1917, Lenin had two aims, revolution without and within Russia, and therefore, on the morrow of his victory, established two institutions: the Soviet state and the Third (Communist) International. The first succeeded, but the second failed. When Lenin died, one party, under Stalin, proposed to develop Russia and neglect the international revolution; the other, under Trotsky, desired to subordinate domestic reorganisation to the needs of the Comintern. Stalin, as we know, won.

A backward agricultural country like Russia cannot develop rapidly without outside assistance and a general atmosphere of peace; neither of these are compatible with active international revolutionary activity.

Hence, Trotsky, in exile, ever an intransigent believer in world revolution, founded a Fourth International, freed from the paralysing hand of Russian leadership and unhampered by the internal problems of a national state.

I submit that similarly the Assassins emerged from the Ismaili movement, which was hamstrung by Egyptian national requirements. Of this there is no direct evidence, but the circumstances warrant this interpretation.

Hence, by analogy, Ibn-Maymun was the Lenin of Islam; Egypt was his Russia; the Fatimid khalifs followed the policy of Stalin; whereas the ‘old guard’ of international revolution, the Trotskyite Fourth International, was Hasan-ibn-Sabah’s Assassins.

Chapter VI: Hasan-Ibn-Sabah Goes Down into Egypt

The Fatimid underground organisation, permeating the world of Islam, was particularly active in wealthy, cultured Persia, the country from which it had sprung. Eminent Persians used to make the pilgrimage to Egypt, the Holy Land of the Ismaili creed, as we have already seen from the example of Nasir-i-Khusraw, whose favourable account of the Fatimid government has been quoted above.

Persia at this time was the centre of the empire of the Seljuk Turks, forerunners of the better-known Ottoman Turks. They conquered Western Asia in the middle years of the eleventh century. Their first Sultan, Toghril Beg, having occupied Baghdad in 1059, as 'Prince of Princes', became Mayor of the Palace to the decrepit Abbassid Khalifs.

The Seljuk sultans made their capital at Rei, Rhages of the Book of Tobit, and Arsacia of the Sassanids, a city in Dellem, a province of North Persia, a centre of Shi'ism and the seat of a famous university. It now acquired a new claim to celebrity; for circa 1040, here was born Hasan-ibn-Sabah, a man destined to immense, if evil, fame. His father, Ali, who claimed descent from the pre-Muslim Arab Kings of Yemen, was an orthodox Shi'ite, from Kufa, of the sect 'of the twelve'.

From a very early age Hasan-ibn-Sabah was conspicuous for his ability and devotion to study. We are told that he read widely, and an early account of his life records that he was 'able, courageous and learned in mathematics, arithmetic, astronomy (including astrology) and magic'. Obviously, a young man of such parts and intellectual curiosity was not likely to be neglected by such able and experienced propagandists as were the Ismaili propagandists.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah was not neglected. At the very beginning of his career the promising young man was presented to the famous Nasir-i-Khusraw, the ablest living Ismaili propagandist, equally famous as a poet and traveller. (As a propagandist he was known by his Ismaili co-religionists as 'the proof' of the faith. Nasir-i-Khusraw had, subsequent to his return from Egypt, devoted himself to the expansion of the Ismaili faith.) After his departure from Rei, Hasan-ibn-Sabah continued his studies under another less famous propagandist or da'is, Amir Darrab. Hasan-ibn-Sabah, we learn, was not easily converted. Like the young Gibbon in his Lausanne exile he argued long and obstinately, and only a severe illness, from which, however, he recovered eventually, finally clinched the matter.

On his recovery he sought out another Ismaili propagandist, named Mu'min, who finally admitted him into the sect. In the sacred month of Ramadan (May-June 1072, AH 464), Hasan-ibn-Sabah was 'received', took the bi'at or oath of allegiance to the Fatimid Khalif, Al Mustansir, and immediately set out for Egypt. His remarkable ability and aptitude for propaganda had not escaped the keen eye of his experienced instructors, and it seems clear that he was sent down to Egypt both to strengthen his loyalty to the cause and to receive special training as a propagandist. In the Russia of our own day we have observed a similar procedure adopted in the case of young propagandists of special promise and of converts of unusual ability.¹

1. According to an historically dubious legend, Hasan-ibn-Sabah was friendly in his youth with two celebrated men of his time, the Nizam-al-Mulk — later famous as a statesman and political

Having been received into the faith, Hasan-ibn-Sabah set out on his travels. In addition to the reasons alluded to above, it may be surmised that the climate of Rei, the capital of the orthodox (Sunni) Seljuk Turks, was not particularly salubrious for the new adherent of the Ismailis. In 1074–75 (AH 457) he went to Isfahan, where he served an apprenticeship of two years – a similar procedure to that adopted in the case of a yet more famous propagandist of Christianity, Paul of Tarsus.² After which he journeyed to Egypt via Damascus, Sidon, Tyre and Acre. Finally he arrived in Egypt, the Fatimid Holy Land, on 30 August 1078.³

In Egypt Hasan-ibn-Sabah was favourably received by the Da'is'd-Du'at, the chief propagandist, or chairman of the congregation '*pro fide*' to adopt an apt Roman Catholic parallel. The abilities of Hasan-ibn-Sabah appear to have been recognised from the start, and he received many marks of favour. He was unable, however, to gain access to the sacred person of the Khalif-Sultan, Al Mustansir, a weak man, who lived a secluded life in his palace, and left both the Egyptian government and his foreign propaganda in the hand of his ministers.

Presumably the actual sight of the royal figurehead was thought to be likely to depress rather than to confirm the faith of his foreign adherents. It is not without significance that most Oriental god-kings are kept in a similar seclusion, for the Mikados of Japan before the Restoration in 1857–58, the Dalai Lamas of Tibet, the (former) 'living Buddhas' of Mongolia, the kings of the Himalayan dynasties of Nepal and Bhutan, are all congruous cases, while the Incas of Peru, whose theocratic despotism had much in common with that of the Fatimids, appear to have been going into a similar decline when the Spaniards arrived to put an end to their dynasty (1533).

All this was, doubtless, not lost on Hasan-ibn-Sabah, whose eye must have been exceptionally keen. Whilst initiated into both the Ismaili esoteric theology in the Grand Lodge of Cairo – to adopt another modern term – and instructed in the details of practical organisation, the realistic pupil can hardly have failed to note the glaring weaknesses of the Fatimid empire at its centre. Religions are usually at their worst in high places. This truth, which was born in on the young Luther when he journeyed in good faith on pilgrimage to the Rome of the Borgias, made itself clear to the young Hasan-ibn-Sabah also, for 'familiarity breeds contempt'. Both the Protestant Reformation initiated by Luther, and that earlier reformation which led to the substitution of the Assassins for the decrepit Fatimids, bear out the truth of this proverb.

writer – and Omar Khayyam, later to be the great astronomer and poet. In fact most translations of Omar's *Rubáiyát* refer in their preface to a legendary agreement for mutual aid made between these 'three friends'. Professor EG Browne has shown this story to be very improbable, the Nizam being a very much older man than either of his two alleged associates: Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, London, 1902, pp 191–92.

2. See Acts of the Apostles, Chapter IX.
3. According to another doubtful legend, Hasan-ibn-Sabah, before becoming an Ismaili, had sought to enter the service of the orthodox Abbassid Khalif of Baghdad. This story, however, seems to have no foundation in fact, and to be connected with the spurious legend of his friendship with the Nizam-al-Mulk. That the Nizam eventually became one of the first victims of the newly founded order of the Assassins is true; but there were many reasons other than personal resentment for the assassination of so formidable a pillar of orthodoxy in Church and State as was this powerful minister. The story seems to be a deliberate invention on the part of the orthodox for the purpose of discrediting the formidable heretic.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah's abode in the metropolis of the faith for about two years, nor can the circumstances under which he finally quitted Egypt, have done anything to lessen his disillusion. We will not have forgotten that the real government of Egypt now rested in the hands of a clique of generals and ministers. The most powerful of these at the time was the commander-in-chief, an Armenian named Bedr-el-Djemaly (*viz*: Star of Beauty). This ambitious soldier, an ex-slave, was the father-in-law of the Khalif's younger son, Mustawili.

Whilst Hasan-ibn-Sabah was in Egypt, the Armenian succeeded in substituting his son-in-law for the latter's elder brother, Nizar, the recognised heir to the throne; the latter was then murdered.⁴

Hasan-ibn-Sabah was of Nizar's party, which, typical of Persian absolutists, declared that recognition by the Imam could not be revoked, conferring as it did a divine right to the throne. In the month of Rajab, AH 472 (January 1080), Hasan-ibn-Sabah, now *persona non-grata*, left Egypt in a hurry after two years' stay. His return to Persia marks the appearance of the Assassins. Unwittingly, but fittingly, the murderers of Nizar were the accoucheurs of a sect devoted to murder.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah, having survived shipwreck on the Syrian coast, reached Isfahan in June 1081. Like Moses before him, he came back from Egypt to found a new creed. Cool and realistic, he must have perceived quickly the unique advantage bestowed by advocacy of the claims of murdered Nizar at a time when Ismaili propaganda in Asia was on the wane. It enabled him to act independently of Egypt with utter devotion to revolutionary propaganda by word and by deed. Let us consider then the situation which faced him.

Obviously a new revolutionary movement could not possibly expect to escape the most ferocious repression at the hands of the medieval theocracy. Since it was directed solely against the then orthodox Muslim organisation, it would be repressed with the utmost ferocity since both the spiritual authority of the Abbassids, and, a more serious question still, the political power of their Turkish masters and allies were directly menaced by the creation of such a movement. The fate of Hosein at Kerbela would be the fate also of the 'new propaganda' unless it could devise some effectual means of protecting itself.

The Ismaili movement, that from which Hasan-ibn-Sabah's own movement had sprung, had solved this problem of self-preservation by transforming itself from an underground sect into a powerful empire. We will not have forgotten the formidable nature of the army of the Egyptian dynasty. Yet this very state power, in medieval Egypt, had itself become an incubus which stifled the revolutionary propaganda that it was originally evolved to protect. How to avoid this fate and yet to evolve an effectual means of self-protection: such was the urgent problem which confronted Hasan-ibn-Sabah at the very inception of his new movement.

How the great conspirator solved his problem we are told by a modern historian:

It has already been mentioned that the Fatimids possessed a terrible weapon in their struggle against the Khalifat and the nations of Christendom in the murderous sect of the Assassins — a weapon, however, that was soon lost to the Egyptian rulers. An academy in which

4 Students of English history will recall the attempt of the Duke of Northumberland to place his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne in 1553: a similar palace plot which in that case miscarried.

the Ismaili doctrines were taught was founded in Cairo, and from there emissaries were sent forth into the lands of the Abbassids in order to prepare the way for the supremacy of the Fatimids over the entire Mohammedan world. At the same time the Ismailians of Persia looked to Egypt for their political and religious salvation.

Thus it came to pass that an ambitious sectarian, Hasan-ibn-Sabah, born at Rei in Northern Persia, betook himself to the palace of the Fatimid ruler in Egypt, and there formed the plan of establishing an Ismaili rule of terror in the East, quite in accordance with the unscrupulousness of his party. The power of the movement was not to be derived from extensive possessions of territory or armies, but from this unconditional devotion and fanatical contempt of death of its adherents, who had at their disposal several impregnable fortresses as places of refuge; *not open war but assassination was to be its basis and security.*⁵

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the whole policy of the 'new propaganda' of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, and very particularly, its technique of terror, whence was ultimately derived the soubriquet under which it passed into history, was no accident or whim of its founder, but arose from the very nature of its activities as a conspiracy unprotected by any state power: in fact, as an organisation of 'professional revolutionaries', to employ an analogous modern term. What they did, they did because they had no alternative. In adopting the organisation and technique which they did, the Assassins bowed to historic necessity.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah seems from the very first to have acted, at least, as the head of an independent movement. As such, he required, above all, a fortified base whence his da'is (propagandists) could come and go in safety. In the year 1090 he found what he was seeking. The history of the Assassins can be said to have begun in that year with the capture of Alamut, thereafter the metropolis of the new order.⁶

5. HF Helmolt, *The World's History*, Volume 3, London, 1904, p 360, our emphasis.

6. Very little is actually known about the founder of the Assassins. Prior to the modern age of universal publicity but little was recorded of the lives of such 'enemies of society' as revolutionary leaders and the founders of heretical sects. Particularly when of an esoteric character, any information was not designed primarily for mass consumption. (For that matter, how much do we know of the contemporary leaders of underground opposition movements in the totalitarian states today?) Medieval Islam also was a regime of such a character. As we shall see, every trace of the literature of, and relating to, the Assassins was destroyed by their fanatical conquerors in 1256.

Practically nothing is known of the great Muslim conspirators who preceded Hasan-ibn-Sabah, such as Babak, Mokanna ('the veiled prophet of Khorasan') and Abu-Muslim; of even the founder of the Fatimid dynasty, Abdullah-ibn-Maymun himself, next to nothing is known. Who could write a 'life' of these formidable but enigmatic figures, the influence of whom on history was, nevertheless, so considerable, which was not a mere tissue of legends? Similarly, of Hasan-ibn-Sabah such a 'life' cannot be constructed from the materials at our disposal. His life work, the dynamic prolongation of this personality, lay in his order, the projection of his life-force. (His extant legends are of dubious authenticity.) That Hasan-ibn-Sabah was, indeed, one of the greatest of conspirators may be inferred from the whole history and technique of his order, which presupposed the pre-existence of a master mind. In that lies his historical significance.

Chapter VII: The Capture of the Eagle's Nest

Upon his return from Egypt Hasan-ibn-Sabah lost no time in organising his followers and in extending his semi-independent propaganda on behalf of the Fatimid Khalif, Al Mustansir, then nearing the end of his long reign and – a significant addition – of his dispossessed and murdered heir, Prince Nizar. By the latter cunning stroke Hasan-ibn-Sabah secured a virtual independence of the Egyptian Khalif, while still professing to act in his name. To act apart from the obedience of some Khalif was then an act of such incredible daring that no Ismaili leader seems even to have conceived of such a notion. In a medieval theocracy the Khalif was the image of God upon earth, and the faithful could no more move out of his shadow than out of God's power.

In the name of Mustansir and Nizar, his Imams, Hasan-ibn-Sabah extended his propaganda throughout the greater part of Persia. Nonetheless, he avoided his birth place, Rei, for fear of the powerful orthodox minister, the Nizam-al-Mulk – the alleged friend of his youth – who was then both the Prime Minister of the Turkish Sultan, Malik Shah, and the chief defender of Muslim orthodoxy. This Muslim 'Prince Metternich' was fully aware of the danger to Church and State represented by the Ismaili propaganda in general, and by Hasan-ibn-Sabah in particular. Accordingly, he gave orders to his son-in-law, Abu Muslim, the Governor of Rei, to leave no stone unturned to effect the capture of this formidable recruit to the legions of heresy.

From this fact, as well as from the character of the great heresiarch himself, we can infer that right from the start the effect of Hasan-ibn-Sabah's propaganda was considerable. For this reason, it became a matter of urgency for the 'new propaganda' – as then and for some time after the movement was styled, until succeeded by its more familiar title – to find a safe refuge from persecution. This was the more so in that it appears practically certain that the strategy of organised terrorism formed part of his original plan.¹ Obviously this implied the certainty of sustained persecution when the authorities woke up to the contingency of the new danger.

Unable to rely on help from Egypt, on account of his heretical doctrine about the succession, and too weak to resist the powerful armies of the Turkish Sultans in the open field, Hasan-ibn-Sabah required, as an indispensable *sine qua non* for his future activities, a 'city of refuge', and from which his da'is could set out and to which they could return, and whence his 'assassins' could depart in safety on their murderous errands.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah was well served by his da'is, who penetrated into many strongholds. Having compared their reports, he fixed upon Alamut (that is, 'The Eagle's Nest', sometimes rendered as 'The Eagle's Teaching'), an impregnable fortress which had originally been built in 860 (AH 246) by a local feudal prince. Thither to prepare the way, Hasan-ibn-Sabah sent one of his most zealous and skilful

1. According to *The Dictionary of Islam* – article 'Assassins' – murder for religious ends was not a new thing in the history of Islam. For example, as early as 661 we read of a 'pact of murder' entered into by a group of Muslim zealots to put an end to the civil war then desolating Islam, by murdering simultaneously the three claimants to the office of Khalif. This 'pact' was, in a sense, the starting point of the Ismailis themselves, since Ali perished as a result of it.

da'is to undermine the loyalty of the garrison, which he seems to have done very successfully. Evidently this part of Western Asia was already honeycombed with sedition.

Alamut, the original 'mountain' of the Assassins, played so great a part in the history of the sect, and the Assassins owed so much to its impregnable strength, that some preliminary description of this formidable mountain fortress may be added. Baron von Hammer-Purgstall describes it thus:

Alamut (that is, Vulture's Nest [sic]), so called from its impregnable position, and situated in fifty degrees thirty minutes East longitude, and thirty-six degrees North latitude, is the largest and strongest of fifty castles which lie scattered about the district of Rudbar at the distance of sixty frasang north of Kasurn. It is a mountainous country on the confines of Dilem and Irak, watered by the Shahrud or King's river. Two streams bear this name, one of which rises in Mount Thalkan, near Kaswin, the other in Mount Sheer and flows through the district Rudbar of Alamut. Rudbar means river land.²

Here in this wild mountainous region, close to the Caspian and on the edge of Central Asia, in a barren and mountainous country, on the verge of Mazanderan, the fabled cradle of the Persian race, Hasan-ibn-Sabah resolved to establish the centre of his movement, in an Asiatic 'Gibraltar', flanked by crags and bastioned by mountains. In choosing this remote and inaccessible spot for his metropolis, Hasan-ibn-Sabah revealed an instinct for sound strategy in both political and military spheres. From the latter aspect of the problem Alamut was ideal; its rugged terrain offered such advantages in guerrilla warfare to the defence that a small force dared not assail it: whereas a large one could not live for long in such an inhospitable land, so far from regular means of communication and supply. Alamut was thus an ideal stronghold for a terrorist sect, which could not dispose of large armies; for a sect precisely such as the great conspirator now intended to found.³

2. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived From Oriental Sources*, Benares, 1926, p 65. A frasang (parasang, farsakh) is approximately 3.0 to 3.5 miles.

3. A modern traveller, Miss Freya Stark, has recently given us this vivid pen picture of the formidable natural environment to the former metropolis of the Assassins:

This is a great moment, when you see, however distant, the goal of your wandering... There was the Assassin's valley, tilted north-eastward: before it, among lower ridges, the Shah Rud showed a gleaming bend. Beyond and higher than all, uplifted as an altar, with black ridge rising to it through snow-fields, Takht-i-Suleiman, Solomon's Throne, looked like a throne, indeed, in the great circle of its lesser peers. Its white drapery shone with the starched and flattened look of melting snow in the distance. The black rock arms of the chair were sharp against the sky. Below it and nearer, but still above the snowline, were summits: the Salamber where we hoped to travel, and the Syalan still blocked with snow. The Elburz summits were hidden by their own range on which we stood, but one could see the general trend of the land from the uninhabited region of the north-east, descending on either side of the Alamut valley, which it enclosed in steep slopes, until it sank north of us into the smooth untidy hill-side of Rudbar beyond the Shah Rud below us, a region now green with transient grass, but waterless and barren, where many easy passes lead to the Caspian shore. — Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels*, London, 1934, pp 210-11.

From a political and psychological standpoint the choice was equally good. Its very remoteness, set amid the rugged fastnesses and the lonely hills, surrounded with mystery the headquarters of an esoteric sect, half of whose power and of the terror which it excited depended upon the skilful exploitation of psychological motives. The very name shortly to be applied to the chief of the sect, and taken originally from the Alamut terrain, 'the mountain chief' – that is, the (so called) 'Old Man of the Mountain' – testifies to the profound wisdom which prompted Hasan-ibn-Sabah to select Alamut as his headquarters. The lonely gorges around Mount Elburz, along which flitted the white-robed slayers of the 'Old Man', heightened the eerie terror forever associated with the name and fame of the Assassins.

The new sect, however, was already established in the region before it contrived the capture of Alamut. In 1083 (AH 495) the adjacent fortress of Lamiasar was captured by the Assassins, as it will hereafter be convenient to call the new sect, which, however, did not receive until much later the name by which history knows it. Their leader on this occasion was Kiya Buzurg Umid, later to become Hasan-ibn-Sabah's Grand Vizier and eventual successor.

From the fact that so soon after Hasan-ibn-Sabah's return from Egypt his followers were already in a position to capture an important fortress, affords an indubitable testimony to the daring and success of his propaganda. Indeed, as early as 1085, a religious writer at the court of Ghazni already mentions Hasan-ibn-Sabah as a successful preacher of the Ismaili heresy in Khorasan and Iraq.

In 1090, however, came the capture of Alamut by stratagem, the first, and in some ways, the greatest feat in the history of the order. Hasan-ibn-Sabah, having won over the garrison by means of his emissaries, is said to have practised the following stratagem: having offered Mehdi, the governor of the Seljuk Sultan, Malik Shah, a sum equivalent to 3000 ducats for as much land as an ox's hide would contain, he split the hide into strips, and with them surrounded the castle.⁴ On his

A fortress so formidable could hardly be taken by direct assault, particularly by the band of armed conspirators which was all that Hasan-ibn-Sabah could dispose of. Indeed Miss Stark aptly comments on this point:

Towards sunset I wandered out along the bank of the stream and looked back at the cliff and the climbing houses against it, and wondered how the Mongols got into the valley [that is, in 1256 – FAR]. Until the sixteenth century, when Shah Abbas built the causeway along the Caspian shore, the region between the sea and the great road must have been almost impassable for an army. – Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins*, p 232.

4. Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins*, p 66.

While the above story of the stratagem which preceded the capture of Alamut is related by Hasan-ibn-Sabah's earliest historians, it has the appearance of being *ben-trovato* rather than strictly true. For a similar stratagem is recorded of several earlier adventurers; for example, Dido, the founder of Carthage; and Hengist and Horsa, the first Anglo-Saxon invaders of England, are said to have played a similar trick on the British Celtic King, Vortigern (450). As Mehdi, the governor of Alamut was, we learn, a descendant of Ali, and presumably a Shi'ite, it seems likely that he was a secret sympathiser with the Ismailis who, as emphasised above, were the extreme wing of the Shi'ite movement, and therefore allowed Hasan-ibn-Sabah to deceive him by so transparent a ruse. Otherwise he would surely have put up a fight. Our suspicions are heightened when we read that Hasan-ibn-Sabah insisted on paying the agreed sum to the dispossessed and fugitive governor of Alamut. A verdict of 'accessory before the act' could surely be obtained upon such evidence from a modern jury.

Anyhow, however obtained, the Assassins had found their metropolis, the Eagle had occupied 'the Eagle's Nest'. Mohammed had indeed, gone to the Mountain! For the reign of the

refusal to surrender the castle, the representative of the Seljuks was expelled and Hasan-ibn-Sabah 'took possession of the castle of Alamut on the night of Wednesday, the sixth of the month, Redsheb, in the four hundred and eighty-third year after the flight of Mohammed, and the thousand and ninetieth after the birth of Christ; seven centuries before the French revolution'.⁵

It was a red letter day in the annals of the Assassins, who henceforth became a state power with an autonomous basis, instead of a mere congerie of disconnected revolutionaries driven from pillar to post, and flitting from place to place, pursued by the fury of orthodox governments, armed with all the machinery of state repression.

'Sheikh Al-Jebal' — 'The Old Man of the Mountain' — the most enigmatic and sinister figure in human history had begun.

5. The mystical theology of the Ismailis, like that of their modern successor, the Persian Baha'is, centred largely upon a doctrine of numerology, which attached an esoteric significance to numbers. By a truly remarkable coincidence, lending itself readily to what the enlightened call superstition, the sum of the numerical values comprised in the name of this castle (1, 30, 5, 1, 40, 6, 400-483) gives the date of its capture by Hasan-ibn-Sabah — *viz*: AH 483 by the Muslim pre-Gregorian lunar chronology.

Chapter VIII: 'The Old Man of the Mountains'

With the capture of Alamut the followers of Hasan-ibn-Sabah passed from the dim region of subterranean conspiracy in which hitherto they had lived, moved and had their being, and entered the ranks of the contemporary powers. In this they resembled their predecessors, the Fatimids; only, more fortunate than Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, the founder of the Assassins himself survived to witness the transformation of his order from obscurity to power. Nevertheless, the 'Malahida' (that is, arch-heretics), as the orthodox Muslim world at first described the new sect, never acquired the allegiance of a vast empire, or the adherence of numerous armies as the Fatimid conspirators had eventually done. No cares of state distracted the attention of the lords of Alamut from the *raison d'être* which had called the sect originally into being, *viz*: propaganda, propaganda by word, and above all, what modern nihilists have trenchantly described as 'the propaganda of the deed'. The despotism exercised by Hasan-ibn-Sabah and his successors was of a strange and an unusual kind. Emphatically it belied the well known saying of Napoleon that, 'Providence is on the side of the big battalions.'

The Austrian historian of the Assassins thus summarises the character of the unique despotism which the head of the order wielded:

The grand-master was called Sidna [or Sidi – FAR], our lord, and commonly Sheikh Al-Jebal, the old man or supreme master of the mountain; because the order always possessed itself of the castles in the mountainous regions, both in Irak, Kurdistan and Syria, and the ancient of the mountains resided in the mountain fort of Alamut, robed in white, like the Ancient of Days in Daniel.¹ He was neither king nor prince in the usual sense of the word, and never assumed the title either of Sultan, Melek or Emir, but merely that of Sheikh, which to this day the heads of the Arab tribes and the superiors of the religious orders of the Sufis and Dervishes bear. His authority could be no kingdom or principality, but that of a brotherhood or order. European historians, therefore, fall into a great mistake in confounding the empire of the Assassins with hereditary dynasties, as in the form of its institution it was only an order like the Templars... The fundamental maxim of both was to obtain possession of the strong places and castles of the adjacent country, and thus without pecuniary or military means, to maintain an *imperium in imperio*, to keep the nations in subjection as dangerous rivals to princes.²

Such was the original technique of the Assassins, as established by Hasan-ibn-Sabah and continued by his successors from 1090 to 1256. It was, in short, to paraphrase a famous observation of Alexander Herzen, who referred to Russian Tsardom as 'a despotism tempered by assassination'. It was a regime which was not so much a political movement as permanent conspiracy, blending, with a skill that seemed to

1. Daniel, Book 7, verse 19.

2. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived From Oriental Sources*, Benares, 1926, pp 72-73. [*Imperium in imperio* – an order within an order, a state within a state – MIA.]

its contemporaries to be uncanny and must always seem extraordinary, motives of the crudest physical violence and the subtlest psychological intimidation. As in the mystical theology which seems endemic to the East – and in which the Ismailis shared the beliefs, or delusions, that perennially recur in the successive forms of theosophy and mysticism, so that mind and matter, body and soul, are inextricably intertwined – so the same subtle fusion marked the technique of terror which the Assassins made peculiarly their own.

It is this technique above all which, despite the meagre details that are all we possess of his life, justify us in recognising Hasan-ibn-Sabah, its original patentee, as an original conspiratorial genius of the highest order. In the efficiency of his methods, to judge by the infallible test of results, the founder of the Assassins stands only a degree below his greatest successors in the allied arts of revolution and counter-revolution, the men of genius who founded the Jesuit Order four and a half centuries after the taking of Alamut. Granting the probable and wholesale plagiarisms from Muslim Spain, which enable us to describe the ‘Order of Jesus’ more aptly and accurately as ‘The Rape of Islam’, it may be inferred that in sheer originality Hasan-ibn-Sabah was without equal or peer.³

Hasan-ibn-Sabah reigned from 1090 to 1123 as first grand-master of the order and ‘Mountain Chief’ of Alamut. While it seems that he himself never formally repudiated the supreme authority of the Fatimid Khalifs, his nominal Imams, yet, after the death of Al-Mustansir, which took place soon after the capture of Alamut (1094), it does not seem that the Alamut regime continued to entertain any relations with the parent body in Egypt, which, on the propaganda field, was soon completely superseded by the new organisation. On that international field, to continue my former analogy, ‘Trotsky’ and his ‘Fourth International’ had entirely superseded ‘Stalin’ (that is, the Fatimid government of Egypt), and its decadent ‘Third International’, weighed down by the preoccupations of Egyptian nationalism as much as its modern antitype is by that of Russia!

However, Hasan-ibn-Sabah, on the throne or, as before, off it, bore a far closer personal resemblance to that modern conspirator-king, Trotsky’s victorious rival, who, enthroned in the Oriental gloom of the Kremlin, both moved and struck in deadly silence, and buried his mole-like industry beneath the habitual secrecy that is endemic to a lifelong conspirator.

The air of the Caspian nourished both these men of conspiratorial genius, the founder of the Assassins, the medieval ‘OGPU’ and our contemporary ‘Assassins’; both men as swift as rattlesnakes, as silent and as deadly.

As Stalin later in the Kremlin still preserved the mask of the conspirator over the face of ‘the autocrat of all the Russians’, so Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the medieval ‘Stalin’, as he may be accurately styled with regard to his personal characteristics, preserved as grand-master of Alamut the silence and secrecy which had become a second nature to him at the Egyptian court, surrounded by enemies, and amid the perilous vicissitudes of the life of an Ismaili da’is, moving precariously and in hourly danger of his life in a sea of difficulties and dangers in which the slightest false step, the smallest error, the most trivial mistake, meant instant exposure, torture, disgrace

3. Chapters XIX and XX *ut infra*. The reader will find the historical *raison d’être* of the technique and affiliations of the Assassins fully treated in Part IV of the present book. Here I am concerned solely with giving a brief but necessary outline of the Eastern history of the Order of the Assassins.

and an agonising death at the hands of primitive Turkish brutality and outraged Muslim orthodoxy.

So completely had silence and solitude entered the soul of the lord of Alamut that, or so we are informed, he only left his room twice throughout the thirty-three years during which he ruled 'the Eagle's Nest', and throughout which he directed the rapidly growing fortunes of the new order during its most difficult and trying period of initial growth and expansion.⁴

The last thirty-three years of the founder's life were thus spent at Alamut in a hermit-like seclusion. That if he lived like a hermit, he yet worked like the proverbial horse, may be inferred both from the increasing and (usually) successful propaganda which his order carried on during this period under his autocratic direction, and also from the religious works which he wrote, as we know from contemporary evidence at this time.

That we know so little of the life of one of the greatest of all conspirators is, after all, scarcely surprising. Who, for example, has not heard of Guy Fawkes? Yet no 'life' exists, or could possibly be written, of perhaps the best known of all Englishmen, the hero of the 'gunpowder plot', the one Englishman known to every child, and for whom one day in the year is forever hallowed and sacrosanct; the mysterious pupil of the Jesuit Mariana (the great theoretician and apologist for assassination),⁵ and a man whose fanaticism, calmness, fondness for the spectacular, for 'murder as one of the fine arts' (De Quincey), and finally, whose iron constancy under torture and death rank him, spiritually, as a man after Hasan-ibn-Sabah's own heart, as, indeed, in a sense the last of the Assassins!

The writings of Hasan-ibn-Sabah during this period appear to have enjoyed a wide circulation and to have exercised considerable influence on their contemporary generation. This, at least, may be inferred from the fact that one of them was deemed of sufficient importance to provoke a reply from the greatest Muslim theologian of the age, Al-Ghazali — known to his contemporaries as the 'proof' of Islam, and who occupies a position of pre-eminent authority in the world of Muslim scholastic theology analogous to that enjoyed in the next century in Christendom by St Thomas Aquinas, 'the angelic doctor'. In Al-Ghazali's work, a dialogue in form, one of his characters an Ismaili, who, having affirmed the belief of his sect in a hidden teacher (that is, the Imam), goes on to appeal to the authority of 'our master, the lord of Alamut'.⁶

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4. A career of such a character hardly lends itself to romantic 'lives'. Yet such are not unknown! When will popular biographers understand that great criminals — though such a description does not fit the Assassins, unless necessity, indeed, be a crime — are cold relentless realists, never 'romantic figures'? Only their crimes are that, and then only at a distance, which, there as elsewhere, proverbially 'lends enchantment'.
 5. The Jesuit, Fr Mariana (1570–1606) wrote his famous book on tyrannicide, *De rege et regis institutione*, in 1599: See Chapters XIX and XX *ut infra*.
 6. 'Our master' — Sidi — was the usual way by which the Assassins referred to their founder. The Spanish title — 'The Cid', the national hero of Spain — is a corruption of the same term. I should perhaps add that Hasan-ibn-Sabah is reported to have put his two sons to death for disobedience and gluttony. Such stories, coming exclusively as they do from Hasan-ibn-Sabah's enemies who were his 'historians', should be taken with a pinch or two of salt, and can probably be entirely discredited. To revert to the Bolshevik analogy, how often, since the Russian Revolution, has not the reactionary press reported the most fantastic homicides on the part of the revolutionaries, on the sole and unsupported authority of 'our correspondent in Riga'? All of which, when checked by other more exact references, have proved to be completely false. It must again be emphasised that the Assassins had no historians except their

The real 'life' of Hasan-ibn-Sabah lay in the dynamic expansion of the movement which he founded. It is in this, and for this, that he really lived, and it is accordingly there, and not in the meagre details of his life which are alone available, that we must look for the real life-work and historic imprint of the great founder of the Assassins.

Already in his lifetime the 'new propaganda' had risen from obscurity to the level of a formidable power, and had become, as no previous heretical sect had ever been able to become in the lifetime of its founder, a name of terror throughout the entire (orthodox) world of Islam.

For we have not forgotten that the times were ripe for an organisation of conspirators, pure and simple; for a movement, solely wedded to the needs of propaganda and of single-minded devotion to the expansion of its ideas. The Order of the Assassins was precisely a body of such a kind; it may be accurately defined as, in essence, a permanent conspiracy. That it fitted the times like a glove constitutes the most apt tribute to the greatness of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, and to his Darwinian – or more accurately, Lamarckian – genius for adapting himself to his given historical milieu.

If 'survival' be the test of conspiratorial genius, then the technique initiated by Hasan-ibn-Sabah must be held to be little less than a miracle, since it enabled a handful of conspirators to survive for nearly two centuries amid a world which execrated them, which harried them with fire and sword wherever found, and whose lively desire to exterminate them was only checked by the yet livelier fear which the superb organisation and self-sacrificing ruthlessness of the handful of sectarians extended over the whole enormous periphery of the Muslim universe.

That Hasan-ibn-Sabah, with a few hundred, or, at most, a few thousand followers, could yet, both in his lifetime and from his grave, accomplish this feat for close on two centuries; this constitutes, above all, the certificate 'of professional competency', which history hands to the founder of the Assassins, this is the 'badge of efficiency' of the 'master-builder' of the conspiratorial art; the name 'Assassin' itself is the epitaph of Hasan-ibn-Sabah – one 'more enduring than bronze'.

'The times were out of joint', and the lord of Alamut and his order were just the men, if not 'to set then right', at least to survive in and to set their grim imprint upon the age of iron which was just then dawning for the world of Islam. Thrusting outward from their impregnable '*point d'appui*', their impregnable metropolis, Alamut, the Assassins seized upon a number of mountain fortresses in Persia, and also established themselves in Syria.⁷ In an age of iron these men of iron survived: they swam boldly amid the stream '*ad majorem Dei gloriam*'; as their Jesuit descendants and imitators were later to phrase it.⁸ The waters of the Mohammedan world were troubled, and who was better fitted than the followers of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' to swim in troubled waters? As formerly on Mount Ararat, now on the adjacent peak of Mount Alamut, the surrounding floods came to a standstill.

For the day of wrath and vengeance was coming for the world of Islam. The golden age of the great neo-Mohammedan civilisation which had begun with the Umayyad rebels against Ali, and which had flowered brilliantly under the

orthodox enemies, the exact medieval counterpart of 'our Riga correspondent'. Hence it is our duty, sitting as it were as a jury, to suspect such stories, particularly when, as here, we cannot check them by other accounts written from point of view less obviously prejudiced and hostile.

7. See Chapters IX and X.

8. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam* – For the greater glory of God, the motto of the Jesuits – MIA.

Abbassids in Asia, the Fatimids in Egypt, and the surviving Umayyads in Spain – was now tottering toward its doom after four brilliant centuries. Already weakened by schism and heresy, by the perennial strife of ‘Pope’ (Khalif) and ‘anti-Pope’, with half a dozen sects fighting for the right to nominate the Khalif, and already shaken by Arab (Carmathian) robbers and Turkish mercenaries, the splendid Mohammedan civilisation was already going down the sky towards oblivion – a civilisation in many ways superior to the much-trumpeted classical civilisation of Europe, or indeed to any other before it.

Now, at the end of the eleventh century, almost contemporary with the foundation of the power of the Assassins, the shaken structure of Eastern civilisation wilted before the assault of new hordes of barbarians, of Christian Crusaders, the ‘Franks’ of the Muslim chroniclers; a new ‘migration of the nations’, such as accomplished the fall of the Roman Empire and the (Western) classical civilisation of Europe seven centuries earlier; more exactly a new ‘Jihad’, or ‘Holy War’; the counter-attack of Christianity, its answer to the brilliant Arab crusade four centuries earlier.

In 1099 the Christian Crusaders took Jerusalem under the leadership of Godfrey de Bouillon. Less merciful than the Arabs under Omar had been when they took it originally from the Christians in 631, the Crusaders killed every living thing within its walls. From the point of view of the civilised Arabs, the Western Crusaders, the offspring of a still semi-barbaric Europe brutalised by a dark age of seven centuries duration, both seemed to be, and were in fact, the exact counterpart of the German savages, ‘the great blonde beasts’ who conquered Rome. Thereafter the Crusaders swarmed over Palestine, Syria and Transjordan, creating feudal states on the contemporary European model and erecting their vast castles, whose grim citadels enflanked with silent pomp of stone, still confront the Arabian wilderness. ‘All Europe’, wrote a contemporary Greek (the Byzantine princess Anna Comnena), ‘is hurled against Asia. The stars in their innumerable multitude are shaken from the sky.’ For nearly two centuries these attacks continued from the West, though their force gradually weakened towards the close of this period.⁹

The Muslim East shook beneath the steel-clad impact of the Western knights. And still worse was to come. For a monstrous shadow was arising beyond the Oxus; the most monstrous in all history; that of the ‘world conqueror’, the world destroyer Jenghiz Khan, whose yellow horsemen were soon to burst on Muslim Asia with an impact even more terrific than was that of the Franks.

Under such circumstances, despair fell upon the East; a despair still exquisitely veiled in the poignant stanzas of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyam. Faced with disaster, both present and proximate, the East shuddered at its approaching fate. ‘The end of Eastern civilisation’ both appeared to be and was at hand.

The Order of the Assassins, the historic masterpiece of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, represented the ‘defence mechanism’ – to employ an apt term culled from modern psychology – of this falling Eastern civilisation. The genius of the founder, if I may anticipate, lay precisely and above all in the fact that he perceived and responded to this psychological fact better than did any of his contemporaries. We fail – as all its older historians failed completely – to understand the essential nature and *raison d’être* of the creation of Hasan-ibn-Sabah if we do not see in it a conscious ‘protective covering’ of a threatened and falling civilisation against enemies whom it was no

9. A modern French historian, Robert Sanzency, has aptly described the Christian Crusades of the medieval era as the last of the barbarian invasions.

longer strong enough to resist in the open field. The 'technique of terror' of the Assassins was a defensive technique. Hasan-ibn-Sabah, like all great men of action, owed his success, his survival and his fame to the fact that he was above all a realist; he gave his age what it required most of all at that juncture in its fortunes. Despite its bizarre surroundings the new order had its feet firmly set in the realities of the contemporary world. Alamut was the impregnable shell in which the most daring and dynamic elements of the threatened civilisation took cover from the contemporary storms that rolled and reverberated across the darkening skies of Islam. Hasan-ibn-Sabah was the weather prophet who best apprehended the nature of that storm-tossed terrain set amid the Frankish lightnings of the West, and with the coming Tartar thunders already trembling in the east.

For, already in the lifetime of the founder, the two foundations of his new technique, the hill-fort and scientific murder, whence derived the two soubriquets under which the order has passed into universal history, were already in being. The fortress of Alamut had become the centre of a whole chain of fortresses, in both Persia and Syria, belonging to the sect, when the first 'Sheikh Al-Jebal' passed away. And by the date of its founder's demise his order had already earned the title under which it is featured in the records of general history. Beginning with Hasan-ibn-Sabah's own alleged friend and former persecutor, the Nizam-al-Mulk, an imposing list of victims was 'entered' in the log-book, so to speak, of 'the lord of the Castle of Alamut, our master'. Long ere the first grand-master of the Assassins 'shuffled off this mortal coil' and departed to his Imam, who, 'hidden in a secret place, awaits the day of his second coming', his order was already the terror of the East. When death at last overtook him, 'the Old Man of the Mountains, Sidi, our master', was already a name of fear throughout the East.

That last event occurred on 23 May 1124 — AH 518 — at an advanced age. His life had been passed in silence and in fear, and he left behind 'a name at which the world grew pale, to point a moral and adorn a tale'. A strange and enigmatic figure, of whom no pen-portrait can be drawn, on account of the secrecy which surrounded his personality and his movements from the cradle to the grave, nonetheless a figure who has left a peculiar and ineffaceable footprint upon the sands of time. Whilst the etymology of so many races bears testimony to his handiwork, and whilst a chill of dread surrounds his sinister soubriquet, 'the Old Man of the Mountain', Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the Sheikh-Al-Jebal, 'Sidi — our master', is assured of at least an indirect immortality.

Chapter IX: The Successors of Hasan-ibn-Sabah¹

As is usual with Oriental dynasties, the successors of Hasan-ibn-Sabah were men of inferior calibre to the founding genius of the order. Hasan-ibn-Sabah left no successor of his own blood. But among the Ismailis, founded upon belief in divine right and hereditary succession, the hereditary principle was too strong to be rejected altogether, and consequently, unlike their European imitators, the Templars and the Jesuits, the Assassins were ruled by a dynasty of hereditary princes, the descendants of Hasan-ibn-Sabah's Grand Vizier and eventual successor, Kiya-Buzurg-Umid – whom we will remember as the hero of the first successful raid of the Assassins, that which established them in the hill-fort of Lamiasar some years prior to the capture of Alamut.

As is also normal, unfortunately in absolute monarchies, the dynasty tended to degenerate. The later grand-masters appear to have been men of straw, *rois faineants* of the type of the later Fatimid khalifs. In this respect the dynastic history of the Assassins, again like that of their Fatimid (Ismaili) predecessors, demonstrated the absolute incompatibility that must always exist between the hereditary principle and the effective direction of a permanent revolutionary conspiracy against society, such as was pre-eminently the propaganda of the Assassins. Subsequent to its founder, the Assassins only produced one man of directive genius, Sinan u'd-Din-Rashid, and he, as we shall see presently, achieved initiative and fame only when entirely removed from the jurisdiction of the Alamut regime.

That which was both great and distinctive in the order was the sole work of the mastermind who had first designed it: it is a silent but overwhelming tribute to his unique greatness which had no equal or successor. As so often in the history of religions, that of the Assassins – if, indeed, we are justified in calling it a religion – was weakest in its highest places. After Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the 'old man' seems to have been more or less of a liability to the mountain!²

I subjoin a chronological list of the seven grand-masters of Alamut, between 23 May 1124 (518 AH) and 19 November 1256, when Alamut was surrendered by its last grand-master, Rukn-u'd-Din, to the Tartar (Mongol) 'hordes' of Hulagu Khan, grandson of that most destructive of all 'scourges of God', the yellow conqueror, Jenghiz Khan. (The line of descent is from father to son.)

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1. In the following chapters I shall subjoin a brief but necessary resume of the history of the Assassins in both Persia and Syria. I pass briefly over this section of the subject, as the real historic significance and peculiar interest of the Assassins does not lie in their external history, which was not particularly eventful, but in their original 'technique of terror', which is treated *in extenso* in the third part of this book.
 2. No doubt, this degeneration may have been due, in part, to the isolation of the sect. But, while the Jesuits elect their generals, and have, of course, no hereditary succession, there too we shall have occasion to note a similar degeneration. No subsequent general of the order can be even remotely compared to the two great founders, Ignatius Loyola and Diego Lainez, who stamped the greatest Catholic order with their ineffaceable personal touch, which had never been removed or even substantially subtracted from or added to.

Whilst Hasan-ibn-Sabah was a strong supporter of hereditary succession – at least where it did not clash with his own personality and plans – there is no evidence to show that he foresaw or intended his own order to be ruled on a hereditary basis. His own experience of the degeneration of the Fatimids rather points in a contrary direction, as does his execution of his own sons, if, indeed, there is any truth in this story.

- 1 Kiya-Buzurg-Umid – 23 May 1124 to 20 January 1138 (AH 518–532).
- 2 Mohammed – 20 January 1138 to 21 February 1162 (AH 532–557).
- 3 Hasan (the Second) – 21 February 1162 to 10 January 1166 (AH 557–561).
- 4 Mohammed (the Second) – 10 January 1166 to 1 September 1210 (AH 561–607).
- 5 Hasan Jalal-U’ d-Din – 1 September 1210 to 2 or 3 November 1220 (AH 607–618).
- 6 Ala-U’ d-Din – 2 or 3 November 1220 to 1 December 1255 (AH 618–653).
- 7 Rukn-u’ d-Din – 1 December 1255 – 19 November 1256 (AH 653–654) – when Alamut surrendered to the Mongols which ended the Persian branch of the Assassins. (As we shall see later, the Syrian branch held out a few years longer, and was never so completely extirpated.)

Such was the line of the supreme pontiffs of the Assassins: it remains to note the chief internal vicissitudes of the sect throughout the period in question, before turning to the far more interesting and important question of that unique organisation and technique, wherein consists the peculiar fascination and historic significance of the sect, or order, of the Assassins.

Accordingly I deal, *seriatim*, with the evolution of the (Persian) *imperium in imperio* of Alamut – for this, rather than a state or kingdom, was what the dominion of the Sheik Al-Jebal in reality amounted to. I deal with the successive grand-masters in chronological order.

Hasan-ibn-Sabah had died childless – according to his enemies on account of his own execution of his two sons because of their gluttony and disobedience to the strict religious law of the sect. He was succeeded by his Grand Vizier, Kiya-Buzurg-Umid, from whom the subsequent grand-masters were descended. We know from his capture of Lamiasar in 1083 that he must have been associated with Hasan-ibn-Sabah from the earliest days of his propaganda, and was therefore an old man when he succeeded him in 1124. He continued, substantially unaltered, the policy of Hasan-ibn-Sabah. As the historian of the Assassins observes in this connection, ‘daggers and fortresses were the foundations of Hasan-ibn-Sabah’s power, and that of his successors rested on the same basis’.³

The two chief events of the reign of the second grand-master were, firstly, his successful defence of Alamut against a Turkish invasion; a feat which, at one and the same time, revealed both the necessity for an impregnable centre for the movement, and also the entire suitability of Alamut for the execution of such a role: the keen strategic sense of Hasan-ibn-Sabah was justified by the sequel. The military operations of the second Sheikh Al-Jebal were not, however, uniformly successful. The weakness of the Assassins in the field was such that several of their fortresses were lost, though only temporarily. Alamut itself was lost for a few months. Secondly, in 1126, the Assassins acquired a similar fortified base for their growing power in Syria. For in that year the strong castle of Bania fell into their hands.

Thus the growth of the sect in influence, territory and power, which had begun under Hasan-ibn-Sabah, was continued under his successor.

The reign of the next grand-master, Mohammed (1138–62), demonstrated the weakness of the hereditary principle, as the new ruler, nominated by his father, appears to have been a weak man, devoid of any special aptitude for the post. That the government of the Assassins represented the sect at its weakest and not at its

3. See Chapter VI, *supra*.

most dynamic is, however, shown by the great increase in the order's terroristic activities during the reign of this admittedly weak ruler. Two Khalifs were 'taken off' during his reign, and the formidable Syrian fortress of Masyaf became the centre of the Syrian branch of the order in 1138. Even in his own lifetime, however, Mohammed was overshadowed by his son, Hasan, who succeeded him in 1162: Hasan the Second – called by his disciples 'Hasan 'Ala Dhikrihi's – Salaam', or 'Hasan, on whose mention be peace'.

This fourth pontiff, unlike his predecessor, was a rather remarkable man, whose bizarre personality and grandiose claims bear a marked resemblance to that of the fantastic Fatimid Khalif, Al-Hakim, the present divinity of the Druzes. Both were fantastic figures, who remind us of Caligula and Elagabalus.⁴ Already in his father's lifetime Hasan had claimed divine honours for himself, and had been compelled by his relatively orthodox father to make a public apostasy. Two hundred and fifty of his supporters were put to death, and many more expelled from Alamut.

Having eventually succeeded to the grand-mastership, Hasan was in a position to give effect to his designs. He accordingly took a leaf out of the book of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, the founder of the Fatimid dynasty itself. Just as the latter had repudiated his own ancestors and had proclaimed himself to be the physical descendant as well as the spiritual heir of Ali and Fatima – and, therefore, of the Prophet Mohammed himself – so Hasan the Second repudiated his own physical ancestors, his two immediate predecessors, and proclaimed himself to be the physical heir, and, therefore, spiritual representative of the martyred Fatimid prince, Nizar, whom Hasan-ibn-Sabah and the Assassins, throughout, held to be the rightful Imam. We have not forgotten the extraordinary importance which the Assassins – in common with all the Ismailis and, indeed, all Persian sects down to, and including, the Baha'is in our own day – attached to legitimate succession and physical descent.

By assuming this role of the heir of Nizar and, therefore, as the rightful heir of the Fatimids, Hasan finally broke even the nominal link, which the Alamut regime hitherto had never repudiated in name, with the Fatimid Khalifs of Egypt, their parent body. To continue my modern analogy; the 'Fourth International' had now completely separated itself from the decadent organism whence it had originally emerged. (The famous Turkish Sultan, Saladin, finally extinguished the Fatimid dynasty by his conquest of Egypt in 1172, eight years after Hasan's 'apostasy'.)

Hasan 'the apostate' followed up this daring innovation by one yet more daring still. Hitherto the Assassins had reserved their 'secret doctrine' for their higher initiates, but, outwardly at least, had conformed to the tenets of Islam. Indeed, during the reign of Hasan's predecessor, an embassy from the Turkish Sultan, Sanjar, when sent to Alamut in a period of truce, had been furnished by the Sheikh Mohammed with a perfectly orthodox 'declaration of faith', and an invitation had been sent to the Turkish court to send orthodox (Sunni) theologians to examine its authenticity.

Now, however, Hasan threw off all pretence of loyalty to the letter of Islam. On 17 Ramadan, AH 559 (8 August 1164), he held a public meeting of all the Ismailis, which he declared to be 'The Feast of the Resurrection' (Od-i-Qiyamat), and, in a homily (Khutba) which he preached on this occasion, 'he not only declared himself to be the Imam, but announced that the letter of the law was henceforth abrogated,

4. See Chapter III, *supra*.

and that all the prescriptions of Islam were intended not in a literal, but in an allegorical sense'.⁵

Having carried through this 'reformation' successfully, he assumed the public style of imam, ordered prayers to be said in his own name at the mosque, and created a new propaganda known as 'the propaganda of the resurrection'. He seems to have made public the secret rites of the esoteric Ismaili theosophy, a deed which aroused the execration of the Muslim world, which, from that time on, referred to the heretics of Alamut as the 'Malahida' ('the impious ones' – the arch-heretics *par excellence*). Hasan, however, rechristened Alamut as 'the believers' town' or 'Mu'min Abad'.⁶

The daring innovations of the fourth grand-master were not, however, destined to eventuate in a permanent addition to the religions of the world, as the fantastic apostasy of his prototype, the Khalif Al-Hakim, is still perpetuated by the bizarre sect of the Druzes of Mount Lebanon. On 10 January 1166, he was poisoned in the fortress of Lamiasar by his brother-in-law, Husein-ibn-Namvar, a prince of the former reigning house of Buwayh.

He was succeeded by his son, Nur-u'd-Din Mohammed, who put to death not only his father's murderer, but also his entire family. The fifth grand-master continued his father's doctrines, and is reported to have been a man of literary attainments and philosophic culture. He took his position as head of the sect seriously, and enriched the 'technique of terror' of the Assassins by the addition of 'arguments, weighty and trenchant' – *viz*: the purse and the dagger.⁷ In general, however, he seems to have been a man of weaker mould than his predecessor, and, under his rule, the Syrian branch of the sect temporarily emancipated itself from the jurisdiction of Alamut, under the leadership of the redoubtable Sinan u'd-Din-Rashid.⁸

On 1 September 1210, this Sheikh died and was succeeded by his son Hasan Jalal-u'd-Din, under whose initiative another metamorphosis took place, only this time in a contrary direction to the 'apostasy' of his two immediate predecessors. For the new ruler abolished the entire esoteric cult which had been inaugurated by his grandfather, burnt all heretical books – including those of Hasan-ibn-Sabah himself – did homage to the Khalif of Baghdad, by whom he was treated with marked

5. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, London, 1902, p 54.

6. The secret doctrines of the Assassins, apparently temporarily disclosed by Hasan in the course of his apostasy, are discussed in Chapter XIII, *infra*. On the present subject of Hasan's apostasy, Von Hammer-Purgstall unlooses this typical 'purple passage':

Thus were the bounds of duty and morals at once and openly violated. Undismayed and with heads erect, vice and crime stalked over the ruins of religion and social order, and murder which had hitherto felled the destined victims under the mask of blind obedience, and as the executioner of a secret tribunal, now raged in indiscriminate massacres. – Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived From Oriental Sources*, Benares, 1926, p 144.

One is tempted to add that, on reading the above, the Assassins could well ask to be saved from their 'historian'. And this is the only book in the English language solely devoted to the sect. But, then, as it is abundantly clear, as remarked above, this reactionary writer never even began to understand the great revolutionary order which he yet professed to describe, or possessed even a glimmering of the insight that so greatly surpasses the kind of academic learning which merely consists in collecting facts.

7. See Chapter XVI, *infra*.

8. See Chapters X and XI, *infra*.

distinction, and was known as the 'new Musulman' — that is, as the 'new Musulman', or convert to Islam. The public policy of the sixth grand-master was entirely suited to these actions. He sent his mother, upon his accession, on a splendid pilgrimage to Mecca, where the envoys of the former 'arch heretics' enjoyed precedence over those of orthodox princes; he allied himself with the feudal princes of the surrounding Muslim world, and adapted his way of life to that of the contemporary secular feudal lords, going so far as to reside outside the confines of his hill-forts, a unique proceeding for a pontiff of the universally hated and feared 'Malahida'.

To such lengths did he go in his complacency to orthodox opinion, that he sent for (orthodox) theologians to inspect his library and destroyed everything — including as remarked above, the books of the founder himself — which failed to satisfy their rigorous inquisition. During the reign of this prince the Assassins for the only time in their history ceased to deserve their name. During the tenure of office of the sixth grand-master the 'trenchant argument' was not used by the dwellers in 'the Eagle's Nest'! The dagger of the da'is (the actual Assassins)⁹ remained in its sheath. As a reward for his conversion, the Muslim world conceded to the 'new Musulman' the title of Emir, or feudal prince.

What was the reason for this extraordinary volte-face on the part of the arch-heretical order, one so entirely contrary to everything which the order stood for, and had been specifically created to stand for, in the eyes of the world? Despite the obvious strain of eccentricity in the dynasty, it is difficult to view without suspicion a change of such an incredible nature. When we turn our attention to the contemporary political situation, our suspicions receive a direct and striking confirmation.

For the age of Jenghiz Khan, which spelt death and ruin to Muslim Asia, was now in full swing. 'The World Conqueror' (1162-1226) was then at the height of his power, and all Asia shuddered at the tramp of his invincible cavalry, which moved like a yellow flight of locusts over the world, describing a vast arch from China to the Danube, and from the Arctic circle to the Indian Ocean. Before these assassins — even more efficient than themselves — the (original) Assassins quailed. Their neo-Mohammedan grand-master was, we learn, the first to send an embassy of homage to propitiate the yellow conqueror as soon as he crossed the Oxus into the terrain of Islam.

In view of the above, it is scarcely open to question that the sudden enthusiasm for Islam which was manifested by the chief of Alamut during this terrible era was one inspired by policy rather than by genuine conviction. The Ismailis, after all, however heretical, represented the 'extreme wing' of Muslim culture, of which indeed there is evidence to demonstrate that they formed in fact, though not in the legends relating to them, not the least brilliant segment. Probably their very opportune 'conversion' arose from an acute realisation that the Muslim world, however much divided in belief, yet represented at least a cultural unity, and that, before the Mongol 'hordes' of the new 'scourge of God', all parts of it were equally threatened: and that Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili and Assassin would, all alike, be involved in a common holocaust. If so, the fear was destined to be justified by and in the event.

9. See Chapter XV, *infra*.

The conservatism of the Assassins, always so strong among Ismaili sects, was eventually aroused by this policy of sweeping innovations. Faced with this peremptory demand 'to burn everything which they had worshipped, and to worship everything which they had burnt' (as Gregory of Tours, the old Roman bishop, instructed his Frankish converts), the Assassins revolted. It was not for this that Hasan-ibn-Sabah had created them, to act as the humble pensioners of Baghdad, a power itself long since reduced to a mere shadow of its former grandeur. Hence death by poison cut short the life of the sixth grand-master (2 or 3 November 1220), whose place was taken by his nine-year-old son, Ala'u'd-Din, who reigned until 1255, when he, too, met his end by poison and also at the hands of his own son's partisans. As we shall see below, the recurrence of parricide among the Assassins may have had a theosophical basis in the belief that the soul of each sheikh passed into his successor upon his demise.

This seventh grand-master was an obvious weakling, who seems to have been feeble-minded. Evidently he prefigured and himself symbolised the degeneration of the order. For just as the Roman Emperor Honorius devoted himself to chicken farming on the eve of the sack of Rome by the Goths, on the eve, that is, of his empire's downfall (410), so this grand-master of the Assassins occupied the last generation of the order pasturing sheep, before being poisoned by his son, Rukn-u'd-Din, the last pontiff of the Persian Assassins, a vicious degenerate, whose pusillanimous surrender of his impregnable fortresses to the Tartars ingloriously ended the decadence of a once formidable revolutionary movement.

Nevertheless, the last two pontiffs, men of straw as they were, represented the 'fundamentalist' role of the Assassins: for they, or rather the clique whose figureheads they were, entirely broke again both with Islam and with the surrounding world, and resumed the original heretical and terroristic character of the sect.

Thus, when in 1256, immediately after the accession of the last grand-master, Hulagu Khan of Persia, the favourite grandson of the mighty Jenghiz Khan, set out on his ill-omened western expedition, which ended, almost simultaneously, both the Abbassid Khalifat and its heretical critics, the Ismaili Assassins — 1256–58 — the latter movement was already in a very decadent state, and succumbed with hardly a blow struck in its defence to the ruthless assault of the invincible yellow army, the most formidable fighters that Asia had known since the earliest days of Islam itself, six centuries earlier.

Before, however, attending this *mise-en-scène*, which rang down the final curtain on the spectacular drama of the Sheikhs Al-Jebal, it behoves us to cast a glance at the powerful Syrian branch of the order, through the instrumentality of which the fame and name of the Assassins passed into the consciousness of Europe via the agency of the Latin Crusaders. And further, I shall direct a glance at that fantastic and formidable personality, Sinan u'd-Din Rashid, the Magician of the Mountain, who first made the soubriquet, 'the Old Man of the Mountain', a name of dread and mystery among the Christian nations of the West.

Chapter X: The Syrian Assassins and the Crusaders

The Assassins, as I have demonstrated above, were a Persian sect, in the sense that their headquarters were in Persia and that their founder was himself of Persian origin. Nonetheless, the sect did not profess any exclusively nationalist outlook. Indeed, as I have suggested, it seems altogether probable that it arose in the first instance in conscious protest against the growing nationalism and secularism of the Fatimid regime, and that it was, therefore, in origin a genuine 'international' – to adopt the terminology of the twentieth century (that is, an organisation avowedly created specifically for propaganda on the international field).

In pursuance of their fundamental aim of spreading their tenets far and wide, and therewith of safeguarding themselves by means of their accustomed device of ensconcing themselves in hill-forts, the Assassins looked round for openings and soon found what they were looking for in Syria. As early as the reign of Hasan-ibn-Sabah himself, they first established themselves in Syria, where, under the reign of his two immediate successors, their possessions steadily expanded. By means of purchase or conquest, the Assassins acquired a ring of fortresses east of Tortosa among the mountains of the Lebanon (opposite Cyprus). I have already alluded to their conquest of Baniyas in 1126, in the reign of the second grand-master. And we will also not have forgotten how, twelve years later, they acquired possession of the impregnable fortress of Masyaf in the Lebanon, which, thereafter, remained the centre of their power as a Syrian 'Alamut' until the downfall of the Syrian Assassins in 1272.

The advent and growth of the Assassins in Syria was facilitated by the political changes which characterised the era in question. The successful invasion of Palestine by the Crusaders (1095) had driven a wedge of steel between the Fatimid Khalifat and the petty feudal princes of Syria, its former vassals. (Incidentally, this Christian wedge facilitated the breach between the Persian Assassins and the Egyptian Ismailis by interposing an alien power between them.)

While the newly arrived Christian princes fought incessantly both with the Egyptians and the Syrians, the Assassins acted as 'the rejoicing third', and fished with considerable effect in the troubled waters, playing off Muslim against Christian and vice versa.¹

The Assassins, as a sect about equally hateful to both sides, nevertheless sold their 'professional services' to both impartially. Several of the Muslim princes of Syria employed their services to get rid of inconvenient feudal rivals; for example, their first 'technical' intervention in Syrian politics took place in 1102 (on 12 May),

1. Subsequent to the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 the Latin Crusaders divided Palestine into several feudal states, of which the chief were the kingdom of Jerusalem and its feudal vassals, the Principality of Antioch and the 'Counties' of Tripoli and Edessa. I may add that while the Crusades intermittently continued right throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, yet enthusiasm for them gradually cooled off, and the Franks, as the Muslim chroniclers agreed to call their Western invaders, were forced to rely chiefly on the newly founded religious orders, in particular the Templars, for their defence against the growing severity of the Muslim counter-attack: see TA Archer and CL Kingsford, *The Crusades: The Story of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, London, 1894.

when they were employed by Ridwan, Emir (Prince) of Aleppo, to 'bump off' his local rival, Djanah-u'd-Awalah, Emir of Emessa. The murderers were rewarded by a public establishment in Aleppo.

With the Christian Templars the Assassins also established relationships, the nature of which have never been precisely determined, but which were destined to exercise eventually a profound influence on the fortunes of that powerful and enigmatic order, relations which also, by increasing the odium and, therefore, hastening the downfall of the Templars, itself exercised no small influence on the course of European history.²

The considerable success achieved by the Syrian Assassins did not pass unnoticed at Alamut. Arrangements were made accordingly for the government of the new province, or dependency, of the order. Hence the rigid centralisation which characterised throughout the military organisation of the Ismailis, and of the Assassins in particular, was promptly introduced into Syria. A leading da'is, named Abu-Mohammed, who had originally come to Syria in 1109 as a simple missionary, and who had risen by merit through the successive grades in the Ismaili hierarchy, was appointed to the supreme command, a promotion which he owed to his success in previously acquiring for the sect several strong fortresses in the vicinity of Mount Somnaq. As lieutenant of the Imam and commander of the fortress of the Syrian branch of the sect, he represented the supreme authority of the distant 'Lord of Alamut', to whom he was alone responsible; although, after the style of a modern Jesuit general or provincial, he could, if he wished, consult an advisory council, one consisting in this instance of the 'Mottawalis', or commandants, of the Syrian hill-forts, of which, as in Persia, the domain of the sect consisted.

Abu-Mohammed was accordingly raised from the subordinate position of Ismaili representative in Aleppo to the rank of Grand Prior (Da'is-i Kabir) of the Syrian branch, which position he occupied down to his death in 1169.

Abu-Mohammed fixed his capital at Masyaf, the strongest of the nine hill-fortresses which had by this time come under the jurisdiction of the Assassins. Masyaf was a veritable Syrian edition of Alamut. A modern historian describes it as a 'veritable eagle's nest, perched on a scarcely accessible peak, and commanding a desolate ravine'. The Assassins were evidently good judges of defensive strategy: the 'Old Man' evidently selected his mountains with discrimination!³

It was through the medium of this Syrian branch, or division, of the order that the Ismailis first came into contact with the West. It was from their contacts with the Crusaders that the nickname of the sectaries of Alamut and Masyaf first passed over into the languages of Europe and acquired that dread significance which is now its universal connotation. It was, moreover, from Masyaf, its similarly formidable Syrian metropolis, rather than from the parent fortress of Alamut, that the title 'Sheikh Al-Jebal' – 'the Mountain Chief' – became transformed into the more sinister-sounding soubriquet, 'the Old Man of the Mountain', a title which, along with the fabled 'Prester John' (variously located in Asia and Africa), represented for the later Middle Ages in Europe all the mystery, the mingled terror and glamour, the age-long fascination of the East.⁴

2. The military order of the Temple was founded in 1128, see Chapter XX, *infra*.

3. See Stanley Lane Poole, *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*, New York, 1898, p 48.

4. Whilst I have used the term 'Old Man of the Mountain' in relation to the Sheikhs of Alamut, I must add that the term is of Western origin and dates from the contacts established between the Crusaders and the Syrian branch of the order. There is no proof that the title was ever used

All that modern Europe connotes by the allied terms of anarchist, nihilist and communist; all that atmosphere of mystery and terror, which, in the age of the Reformation, was denoted by the term 'Jesuit', and to that of the Holy Alliance – 1814–48 – was represented by the designation 'carbonari' and 'freemasons', was henceforth connoted to the imagination of medieval Europe by the gloomy fastnesses of Masyaf, where, surrounded by his hashish-drugged slayers, that 'Ancient of Day', 'the Old Man of the Mountain', presided over an endless carnival of death.

The Syrian hinterland has been from ages immemorial the abode of the fantastic, of the mystical, of the bizarre. There flourished of old the black-bearded priests of Moloch, who to the roll of drums and the cry of oxen, passed the firstborn of the land through the fire to Moloch. There, to the clash of cymbals, beneath the pale sky, the white-robed priestesses did honour to:

Ashtoreth, whom the Phoenicians called
Astarte, Queen of Heaven, with crescent horns;
To whose bright image nightly by the moon
Sidonian virgins paid their vows and songs.⁵

There, in later days, the Mandaean of Harran adored the same moon-goddess with rites which were already old when Abraham journeyed down into Egypt. There in the mystery of a paschal dawn, the Samaritan keeps the Mosaic law, offering up a lamp without blemish on Mount Gerizim. There also, today, the Druzes await in confident expectation of his second coming their fantastic red-haired Imam, Al-Hakim, the Fatimid 'Caligula', and here, too, the mystical Yezidis adore Satan, (the 'peacock king' Melek Taus), in his serpent-sanctuary, and shudder in religious horror at the accursed colour blue that is abhorrent both to god and man!

In this land of weird rites and moon-struck sects the Assassins took henceforth their unique place, yielding to none in the mystery by which they were surrounded, and surpassing all their strange competitors in the fear which the white-robed 'angels' of the Ismaili 'paradise' excited in both Islam and Christendom in both East and West alike.

It was, above all, in the reign of the terrible Syrian Sheikh Al-Jebal, Sinan u'd-Din Rashid, that the fear of the Assassins, like a monstrous shadow, fell athwart the West, never to be entirely effaced. It is time to introduce this extraordinary man, with the advent of whom the leadership of the Assassins temporarily shifted from Persia to the mountains of the Lebanon, from Alamut to Masyaf. It was from Sinan above all that the legends relating to the Assassins can be dated. Through his contacts with the Franks he became, *par excellence*, the Sheikh Al-Jebal, and it is to him that the Crusaders refer specifically under that name of dread.

of the Sheikhs of Alamut, since the Crusaders did not penetrate so far East. It does not appear at all likely that any Christian ever set foot in Alamut.

5. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I.

Chapter XI: The Magician of the Mountain

In 1162, the year of the accession of Hasan the Second of Alamut, a da'is of poverty-stricken appearance arrived in the neighbourhood of Masyaf and joined the humbler ranks of the order. Despite his appearance of poverty – he was poorly clad in an old leather coat of shabby appearance when he first arrived – the newcomer quickly established a reputation for the zeal with which he threw himself into educational and medical work among the illiterate inhabitants of the villages which surrounded the fortresses of the order; into these latter, however, he did not seek entrance. His fame soon spread and his cultural accomplishments aroused the interest of the upper grades of the order.

The fame of the itinerant pedagogue reached the ears of the Grand Prior of Syria, Abu-Mohammed himself, who invited the newcomer to take up his residence within the walls of the Syrian metropolis of the order, the impregnable fortress of Masyaf. The latter dutifully obeyed the order of his superior, the representative of the Imam. For seven years he lived in the fortress, winning a glowing reputation on all sides. Only he refused to give any name and was known locally simply as the 'Irakian Sheikh'. Things went on in this way for seven years, until Abu-Mohammed was on his death bed at the age of about ninety, after sixty years' service to the Syrian interests of his order.

The sequel furnishes an interesting sidelight on the government of the Ismaili order. Evidently the apparently indissoluble union between a dictatorship and a ubiquitous spy system, so often demonstrated in the course of history, was a regular feature of the administration of the order of the Assassins.

The interesting sequel is thus described by the eminent French Orientalist, M Stanislas Guyard, whose illuminating monograph represents our most useful authority for this phase in the remarkable history of the Assassins:

One day, the unknown entered his bedroom, and, without any beating about the bush, announced that his end was near. 'Before you die', he added, 'have a look at my diploma of investiture as Grand Prior.' And he produced a commission, which he read out, that conferred this authority upon him. Abu-Mohammed was greatly disturbed by this communication. The humble person whom, for seven years, he had treated as a servant, had throughout carried upon him a commission to succeed him! At the same time Abu-Mohammed learned his name: the doctor, the 'Iraqi Sheikh', was called Rashid-u'd-Din Sinan. Thus was the famous Sinan, the rival of Saladin, presented to those who were to make him a God.¹

Soon the newcomer succeeded to the post of his late predecessor, Abu-Mohammed. It then transpired that he was born in Basrah in lower Chaldea, had originally belonged to a rival sect of the Nosairis, and had then transferred his services to the Assassins, prompted, or so his enemies said, by motives of ambition rather than that of sincere conviction. Arriving at Alamut on foot, penniless, his abnormal

1. Stanislas Guyard, 'Un Grand Maître des Assassins', *Journal Asiatique*, second quarter 1877, my translation.

personality and exceptional abilities attracted the notice of the third grand-master, Mohammed, who educated him along with the future Imam, Hasan. More fortunate than some of the latter's juvenile associates, who were put to death as apostates by the third Sheikh, Sinan survived to play a prominent part in moulding the ideas of Hasan, and was eventually sent to Syria with a commission to succeed Abu-Mohammed, and, presumably, to introduce the new ideas now prevailing at Alamut (see the preceding chapter). Evidently the old Sheikh – or rather, Prior – did not die as quickly as was expected.

For Hasan was murdered before Sinan succeeded, and evidently the latter had no power to supersede the Syrian governor. He therefore waited to step into the dead man's shoes, with the exemplary patience which we have described above. In the meanwhile, it is clear from the sequel that he had made a very thorough study of the Syrian Assassins, upon the psychological reactions of whom he was to play with the sure touch of a master.

Sinan u'd-Din Rashid reigned over the Syrian domain of the order during 1169–93, first as Grand Prior (Dai-i-Kabir) in the name of the Imam of Alamut, and later by taking advantage of the growing weakness of the parent body, he freed his branch of the sect from its dependence upon the Persian order, and himself assumed the supreme rank of Sheikh-Al-Jebal. It was, above all, through their connections with him that the Crusaders became familiar with the name and fame of the Sheikh of the Assassins. By a misunderstanding, to which I shall have occasion to return, the Franks translated the term 'Sheikh-Al-Jebal' – 'the Mountain Chief' – as 'le vieux' – 'the Old One' – which itself became 'translated' into 'the Old Man of the Mountain' – a picturesque but inaccurate designation.

Not content with assuming the title hitherto exclusively reserved for the Persian grand-master, the supreme head of the sect, Sinan took a leaf out of the book of Al-Hakim, the founder of the neighbouring sect of Druzes in Mount Lebanon, and of his former friend, Hasan the Second of Alamut: eventually he proclaimed that he himself was the Imam, or 'expected one'. As it was not an easy matter to persuade so rigidly conservative a sect as were the Ismailis that a mere nobody in origin, as Sinan was, could be the Supreme Teacher – as Sinan suffered in addition from lameness, which affliction was not compatible with the status in Muslim theology of an Imam – he adopted various devices to get round this difficulty, and to make his grandiose claims acceptable to his followers. M Guyard amusingly describes some of these tricks which seem rather more compatible with the title of Magician of the Mountain than with that of a normal pontiff of the Assassins.

The exploits of Sinan in this connection were characterised by great ingenuity, if scarcely by original creations in the conjurers' art. For example, he worked the old device of carrier pigeons with great skill, receiving by means of this service such early information of distant events as to appear supernatural to his simple rank and file, that is, the uninitiated lower orders of the Assassins. On being detected in conversation with a green bird, Sinan audaciously declared that he was conversing with the soul of his dead friend, the grand-master of Alamut, Hasan, 'on whose mention be peace' (1162–66). The higher doctrines of the Ismailis included belief in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. The idea that the souls of the dead reappear as animals does not seem to have been an Ismaili conception, but was borrowed apparently by Sinan from his former sect, the Nosairis.

The high watermark in this conjuring repertoire was reached by Sinan when, by a conjuring trick not unknown today in Hindustan, he held a public conversation

with a headless corpse! The decapitated one explained to a crowd of doubtless gaping Assassins how glorious was the paradise beyond the skies which would receive into everlasting bliss those, and only those, who accepted the divine claims of their magician-Sheikh, and did his bidding against all comers whether Frank, Muslim, Saladin and the Persian Sheik-Al-Jebal himself, who incidentally made several attempts to 'bump off' his rebellious ex-deputy, but found that he had on all occasions met more than his match in the crafty Syrian Sheikh. Like some modern rulers, Sinan, himself an ex-conspirator, knew all the tricks of the trade.

By means such as the above, 'the lord Sinan' produced a tremendous impression upon his simple hill folk, and secured unstinting obedience as readily as any orthodox Sheikh. Doubtless he was a practised conjurer of no small skill: such arts may very well have been studied by the higher ranks of the order, versed, as we know, in the psychological and physical arts of playing upon human credulity with calculated skill. If the means adopted appear a trifle vulgar, no doubt Sinan understood and acted upon the unspoken motto common to the Assassins, as later to their Jesuit disciples, *viz*: 'The end justifies the means.'

At any rate, be that as it may, the 'means' were, in this instance, overwhelmingly successful. Sinan's claims to be the Imam were enthusiastically accepted by the unsophisticated hill folk who gaped at his 'miracles'. Their Sheikh became an Imam, a Divine Reincarnation, even a god. Evidently Sinan was a great psychologist who had not wasted his seven years' apprenticeship, and had explored in every nook and cranny the mentality of the people he was dealing with.²

How successful he was can be judged from the following citation from an Arab-Spanish writer – an orthodox Muslim – who visited Syria in 1184–85. In this record of his travels Ibn-Djobair wrote:

We observed the Ismaili fortresses on the slopes of the Lebanon, a sect which has diverged from Islam, and which claims that the divinity resides in a human being. A demon with a human face, called Sinan, has appeared among them. They acknowledge him as their god whom they worship, and on whose behalf they are ready to sacrifice their lives. So completely have they become accustomed to obeying his orders, that if he orders someone to throw himself from the top over the precipice he does so at once.³

From practices such as the above we might imagine at first sight that Sinan was simply a vulgar conjurer with a flair for deceiving the simple natives of a remote district. Such a judgement, however, would be altogether unfair to the formidable Syrian Sheikh, who, whilst he played with consummate skill upon the ignorance and prejudice of his rustic followers, yet, *vis-à-vis* the outside world displayed qualities of an altogether more elevated character. Both his relations with the Franks and his long duel, in particular, with the famous Sultan, Saladin, reveal him as a calculating and skilful politician, endowed with an extraordinary audacity.

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2. Apparently the habit of conjuring was one not unknown prior to Sinan's day. We have not forgotten 'the veiled prophet of Khorasan', with his green veil and his pretension to invulnerability. Abdullah-ibn-Maymun himself, the founder of the Fatimids, and the 'stepfather' of the Assassins, is said to have been an expert necromancer. The atmosphere of the Ismaili movement was heavy with mysticism, and the line between the mystic and the quack is notoriously hard to draw.
 3. Guyard, 'Un Grand Maître des Assassins', p 364.

The era during which Sinan u'd-Din Rashid occupied the grand-mastership of Syria, the era of the apogee of the Syrian branch of the order, was one fraught with an especial degree of peril for this section of the Ismaili order. For, hitherto, the Assassins had faced a political environment, upon the divisions of which they had played to their own advantage. From 1099, when the Crusaders first took Jerusalem and set up their feudal states as a wedge driven into the heart of Islam, down to 1187, when the great Sultan, Salah-ud-Din, broke the power of the Crusaders at Hattin and recaptured Jerusalem, the Assassins found themselves able to play off Muslim and Christian against each other. But after the latter date they faced a great Turkish empire, presided over by the famous warrior, Saladin (1138-1193), and inflamed against the 'malahida' ('arch-heretics') by both fear of the Assassins' daggers and by the fiercest Muslim orthodoxy.

Saladin – a name famous in the Muslim annals, a kind of Turkish 'Bayard', a feudal knight '*sans peur et sans reproche*' – set to work to unite Western Asia under a single sceptre. Between 1172 and 1186 he very largely accomplished this feat. Inheriting Syria from his uncle, Nur-ud-Din, who had already driven the Christians from Antioch and Edessa, Saladin extinguished the Fatimid Khalifat, in Egypt (1173), constituted himself as the guardian and 'mayor of the palace' of the Abbassids of Baghdad, and extinguished the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187, which he subsequently defended successfully against the combined armies of the Crusaders, that is, of the Third Crusade, led by the kings of England and France, Richard Coeur-de-Lion and Philip-Augustus.

So powerful and orthodox a ruler as was Saladin could scarcely be expected to tolerate a hornets' nest right under his eyes in the heart of his dominions. Moreover, he could not afford to do so in view of the deadly danger which it represented to his personal safety. Already his predecessor, Nur-ud-Din, had made an unsuccessful expedition against the fortresses of the Assassins, but had returned upon finding a warning pinned to his pillow by a poisoned dagger. The rebellious governor of Aleppo, one Gumushtigin, when hard pressed by Saladin's army, had sought the 'professional' assistance of the Lord of the Mountain. The sequel terminated in Saladin's own tent, when a da'is or slayer⁴ of Sinan was cut down by Tughril, the lord chamberlain, when about to stab the sleeping Sultan.

On 22 May 1176 another even more desperate attempt only missed by the proverbial hair's breadth.⁵ Saladin, bold to the point of fearlessness in battle, was unnerved by this insidious ever-present menace, forever creeping stealthily upon him. He resolved to strike a decisive blow in order to erase forever this hornets' nest. So, in August 1176 Saladin, not yet master of Jerusalem, but already the greatest Muslim ruler of the Middle East, master of Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and Arabia, marched into the country of the Ismailis with a formidable army, equipped with siege artillery, and besieged Sinan's metropolis, Masyaf. Having finished off the Ismailis (Fatimids) of Egypt, obviously he intended to finish off the sect altogether by putting an end to its even more obnoxious offspring, the Assassins.

The sequel is so extraordinary, and even incredible, that I may be pardoned if I transcribe the occurrence partly in the *ipsissima verba* of the eminent orientalist and historian who is Saladin's biographer, in his account of the strange episode which followed: one that reveals in a lurid light of fantastic hue the bizarre atmosphere in which lived this incredible chief of an incredible order:

4. See Chapter XV, *infra*.

5. See Chapter XVIII, *infra*.

It was impossible to carry his life at the disposal of the Sheikh of the Assassins. Saladin accordingly determined to enter their country and destroy them root and branch. He went into this gloomy region in August, and in August he came out; but the Old Man still ruled on his Mountain, and the Assassins were unconquered... His siege made no impression on the rock fortress.

Saladin retreated abruptly, and Mr Lane-Poole is disposed to accept, at least in substance, the account given by Sinan's panegyrist, Abu Firas, whose account may be condensed thus.

Sinan was absent from Masyaf when the army of Saladin arrived before that fortress. Returning suddenly, he penetrated alone by night through the camp and guards of Saladin, into the Sultan's tent. (I omit certain obviously incredible details of a supernatural character, inserted by the hagiographer. For example, that the master shone like a glow-worm, etc, etc.) Saladin awoke to observe a figure gliding out of the door of his tent:

By his bedside were some hot scones of the shape peculiar to the Assassins, with a leaf of paper on the top, pinned by a poisoned dagger. There were verses on the paper: 'By the majesty of the Kingdom! What you possess will escape you in spite of all, but victory remains to us. We acquaint you that we hold you, and that we reserve you till your reckoning be paid.

Saladin, we read, was utterly terrified, particularly by his fleeting glimpse of the terrible Sheikh, as he flitted from the Sultan's tent. He incontinently retreated and implored peace on the basis of a mutual pact to refrain from molestation. This was granted by the victorious Sheikh Al-Jebal, and Saladin, in future, was careful to steer clear of the country of the Assassins.

An amazing episode! But it is clear at least that something really extraordinary must have occurred to terrorise effectually such a lion-hearted warrior and pillar of the Muslim faith as was the great Sultan of the East. For it is certain that Saladin promptly withdrew in ignominious failure, and never, despite his subsequent increase in power and prestige, molested Sinan's strongholds again.

Saladin's English biographer sums up his impressions of this astounding, almost melodramatic, midnight visitation:

This [that is, the narrative of Abu Firas – FAR] is the narrative of a partisan and a visionary, but it may well be based upon fact. Sinan may actually have groped or bribed his way to Saladin's tent and thus convinced him in person that no precautions could avail him against the knives of the secret society. The dread of assassination joined to the impracticable character of the district and the strength of its fastnesses, may reasonably have induced the King to abandon his design of uprooting the abhorred sect: and if he could not wholly destroy them, the only prudent alternative was to make them his friends.⁶

6. A vivid pen-picture of Sinan u'd-Din Rashid, in the plenitude of his power as Sheikh Al-Jebal, is given by a famous novelist of the last generation, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, in his fine

Whatever its exact nature, it cannot be reasonably doubted that Sinan accomplished a master-stroke, of diplomacy certainly, and most probably of personal audacity as well. To defeat and terrorise without a battle one of the bravest warriors and most powerful Sultans in the entire course of Muslim history was, in and by itself, a sufficiently extraordinary feat; one far beyond the powers of the most formidable warriors of both the Latin West and the Turkish East. But in Sinan's case it is made the more extraordinary by the incredible disparity between the strength of his adherents and those of Saladin. On the one hand, the great general, unconquered Sultan of the East, the soldier who was to hold Jerusalem against the combined armies of a fanatical Christendom led by the great Richard 'Lion Heart' himself, with a great army, vast wealth and a formidable empire at his disposal; on the other, a handful of hillforts, a few square miles of adjacent territory, a few thousand adoring followers plus an uncertain income from the 'danegeld' (blood-money), or baksheesh, that the Lord Al-Jebal could extort from the fears of his neighbours. In the history of the order the retreat of Saladin represented a veritable 'Austerlitz'. On that day, the most subtle and sinister 'technique of terror' in all history received its most brilliant vindication!

Hereafter the great Turkish Sultan left the mountain Sheikh severely alone. Indeed, there seems to have been something in the nature of an alliance between them. Abu Firas, Sinan's biographer – or rather, hagiographer – tells us that when in 1192 Saladin made peace with Richard of England, he stipulated that the territories of the Sheikh Al-Jebal should be included in the arrangements. At any rate, when, subsequent to the recapture of Jerusalem by Saladin eighty-eight years after its first capture by the Crusaders of Godfrey de Bouillon in 1099 – Europe once again took up arms to recover the Holy City – the Assassins rendered no aid against the hard-pressed Saladin. And this was so despite the fact that it is known that they had some kind of secret agreement with the Templars.⁷

Indeed, though it is improbable that the chivalrous Saladin had any direct hand in instigating this particular deed, Sinan actually rendered him some indirect

historical novel, *The Brethren*, dealing with the era of the Crusades. In this work of fiction, both the formidable personality of Sinan, and the mysterious atmosphere of the Lebanon fortress of Masyaf, are skilfully recaptured and vividly portrayed by the gifted author. Undoubtedly, Sinan was, apart from the founder, Hasan-ibn-Sabah himself, the most extraordinary personality to emerge from the ranks of the Assassins; and we know a good deal more about him, thanks to his rapprochements with Saladin and the Crusaders, than movements forever shrouded in an impenetrable veil of secrecy.

Speaking generally, it would seem that the Assassins were remarkable rather for blind obedience and superb discipline than for striking individuality and/or outstanding originality. The unceasing 'sacrifice of the intellect' demanded of their rank and file would itself effectively inhibit any great personality from appearing in their ranks. In this respect, as in so many others, the main features of the Ismaili order were faithfully reproduced by the Jesuits, their second-hand disciples. It is, for example, very interesting to note that, in both orders, the really outstanding personalities did not receive their training inside the order which they subsequently adorned. This was true of the men of genius who founded the Jesuit order, and who have never been remotely approached by their successors: Ignatius Loyola, Lainez, Francis Xavier. It was also so among the Assassins, whose two men of genius, Hasan-ibn-Sabah and Sinan u'd-Din Rashid, were both trained outside the sect: Hasan in Egypt, and Sinan as a Nosairi. No later Sheikh of the Assassins approached either in genius or personality. Again, as in the case of the Jesuits, the individual was, as a rule, dwarfed by the collective greatness of the order: Stanley Lane Poole, *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*, New York, 1898, pp 149-51.

7. *Vide* Chapter XX, *infra*.

assistance by 'taking off' the Crusading leader, the Marquis of Montferrat, the titular king of the Sultan's most formidable enemies. This murder (1192) represents a masterpiece of calculation and of technical efficiency. As such I shall have occasion to consider it in due course, among the *causes célèbres* of the order in the pursuit of 'murder as one of the fine arts', that 'science', with the theory and practice of which the 'Old Man of the Mountain' and his order are forever featured on the canvas of world history.

This *chef d'oeuvre* represented Sinan's swan song. In 1193 he departed this life, or in the fervent belief of his followers, 'was taken up into that secret place, whence the Imam, in his own good time, will return to judge this world'. This belief, it may be added, continued to be cherished fervently by the Syrians, and is still said to persist in the Lebanon. The hold exercised by Sinan over his followers persisted even from the tomb. Hereafter the Syrian Assassins seem to have retained their independence.

In the same year as Sinan, died the Sultan Saladin, the conqueror both of the Holy City, Jerusalem, and of the Ismaili 'anti-popes', the Fatimid Khalifs of Egypt. The great soldier quitted this transient life just as the last echoes of the iron-clad hooves of Richard Coeur-de-Lion and his Crusaders were dying away, baffled, in the West, and just as the yet more terrible hooves of the Tartar squadrons were breaking in on the stillness of the East. Had Saladin survived a couple of decades longer, Jenghiz Khan would have found a foeman worthy of his steel, and the course of Asiatic history might well have been substantially altered.

Such, however, was not the will of Allah! Saladin slept in his marble tomb at Damascus, surmounted by the motto of haughty humility: 'There is none great but God.' He did not survive to behold the irretrievable ruin effected from the Far East, in the generation after his death, of the splendid Muslim civilisation which the great Sultan had defended so brilliantly against the doughtiest warriors of the West. 'Saladin was the greatest Mohammedan ruler of his time, and one of the greatest and noblest characters in the whole of Islam.' The same historian adds:

Master of Egypt, Syria and Arabia, he ruled, at last, in power and wisdom, an empire extending from the African Tripoli to the Tigris, and from the mountains of Armenia to the Indian Ocean. Pure in life, rigid in the Mohammedan faith and practice, just in judgement, courteous in demeanour, boundless in liberality, brave as a lion in the field, Saladin shines forth as the brightest example of Oriental knighthood.⁸

In his journey through the Inferno, Dante beheld Saladin sitting alone.

For the day of doom had now come for Islam. On the threshold of the thirteenth century the storm from the steppes at last broke, the monstrous brood of Gog and Magog. Jenghiz Khan and his 'hordes' crossed the Oxus in the opening years of the thirteenth century, and in two generations of destruction without parallel, reduced Muslim Asia to a skull-strewn ruin. That avalanche, which thundered and reverberated from China to Syria, made no distinction between orthodox and heretics, between Sunni and Malahida, between Abbassid and Ismaili; even between the Assassins and their victims. Roaring onward in an orgy of indiscriminate and unbridled destruction, it swept into a common oblivion Muslim

8. Edgar Sanderson, *Outlines of the World's History: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern, with Special Relation to the History of Civilisation and the Progress of Mankind*, London, 1885, p 9.

and heretic, 'the Mountain' and Mohammed; the Abbassid Khalif, the Lord of Baghdad, and the Sheikh Al-Jebal, the Lord of the Mountain.

We approach the end of the Assassins. It is time to bring down the curtain on the final scene.

Chapter XII: The Fall of the Assassins

It is time to return to the Persian Assassins. We will not have forgotten that we left them in a state of increasing decadence under the regime of the seventh grand-master, Ala-u'd-Din (Alladin), an obvious weakling, who seems to have been a tool in the hands of the die-hard conservatives of the order. Under their auspices the seventh grand-master reversed the neo-Mohammedan policy which his father, Jalal-u'd-Din, the 'new Musulman', had adopted through motives of prudence or fear. During his reign the order returned to its traditional role as the 'Ishmael' of the Muslim world; as an heretical and terrorist movement whose hand was against everyone, and which drew upon itself once more the hatred of the entire Muslim commonwealth.

Ala-u'd-Din was only nine years old when he succeeded to the position of Sheikh of the Mountain. He reigned for thirty-five years, and his own death, like that of his father, was due to parricide. He was eventually murdered (1 December 1255) by, or with the connivance of, his son, Rukhn-u'd-Din, whom he had long regarded with extreme jealousy. Indeed, he had actually endeavoured to disinherit his son, but was prevented by the blind devotion of his subjects, to whom the choice of an Imam, once made, could never be revoked. I have already drawn attention to this belief in the case of Hasan-ibn-Sabah and Prince Nizar. Readers of the Old Testament will not have forgotten 'the law of the Medes and Persians which altereth not'.¹

Rukn-u'd-Din, born when his father was only nineteen years old, was the eighth and last grand-master of the Assassins. We are told that he was a vicious degenerate, whose favourite amusement was setting camels to fight each other to gratify his sadistic instincts. Evidently the Ismaili order must have gone far in the degeneration which had previously overtaken its Fatimid predecessors, when such a ruler could occupy the throne of the great conspirator, Hasan-ibn-Sabah. I have already had occasion to allude to the essential incompatibility between the hereditary principle, so blindly adhered to by the Assassins, and the effectual prosecution of a permanent conspiracy against society, such as the order was originally created and organised to become. Doubtless this basic incompatibility represented the 'Achilles' heel' of the sect and was a major cause of its downfall.

As a modern historian has aptly remarked in this connection:

The Assassins became terrible to the Crusaders, as well as to the Persians and the Saracens; but their order contained within itself the germs of disintegration from the operation of which they would have fallen had they not been overcome by the Mongols.²

This last event, the fall which ended the decline of the Assassins, was now destined to be effected. The last grand-master of the Assassins had barely time to put to death his father's murderer, Hasan of Mazanderan — whom rumour stated to be his accomplice — before the storm broke which was destined to obliterate the Alamut

1. Esther, Chapter I.
2. Arthur Gilman, *The Story of the Saracens: From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Bagdad*, London, 1887, p 434.

regime. By a curious coincidence – noted with satisfaction by the Muslim chroniclers as a sure sign of heaven’s wrath on the heretical parricide – exactly a year (1 December 1255–19 November 1256), according to the lunar calendar in vogue in the Muslim world, separated the murder of the seventh grand-master from the capture of his parricide son by the Mongols.

A critic may perhaps reverently comment that whilst no doubt providence ‘moves in mysterious ways its wonders to perform’, yet it requires the exercise of considerable faith to see in that Mongol ‘scourge of God’, Hulagu Khan, the instrument of chastisement reserved for the misdeeds of the Assassins by what Calvinists would call ‘the heavy hand of an angry God’.

From a more mundane point of view, however, it certainly seems a case of ‘the punishment fitting the crime’, when we see the Assassins exterminated by the Mongols, those other assassins, who, if more crude in their methods, made up in mass quantity what they lacked in technical quality!

Scarcely was Rukn-u’d-Din seated on his throne than the storm, which had been muttering on the horizon since his grandfather’s panic conversion to Islam, finally broke. Having swept like a flight of locusts from the steppes out over the Far East, under the ‘world conqueror’ Jenghiz Khan himself, a new westward drive now commenced under the leadership of Hulagu Khan, the favourite grandson of Jenghiz, who inherited a considerable share of the military ability, energy, and calculated cunning of the great ‘Khan of Khans’: and who derived hence also a full share of the ferocious cruelty which sent a shudder across the world of East and West, and which survives in the proverbial language of modern times, *viz*: ‘Scratch the Russian and you find the Tartar.’

As Jenghiz and his yellow horsemen had destroyed forever the great Muslim civilisation of Central Asia, transforming the fertile and civilised ‘Bactria’ – a famous cultural centre of ancient and medieval times – into the desolate wastes of modern Afghanistan, so Hulagu set out in 1256 on his ‘Drang nach Westen’, with the objective of similarly obliterating the cultural centres of Western Asia. In the course of this western march the Mongols advanced on Baghdad to end the five centuries of Abbassid rule, first, however, obliterating the Assassins en route to the West.

However, before describing this culminating debacle, a word may usefully be added in reference to this formidable Mongol power, which effaced almost simultaneously both the Abbassid Khalifs and their Ismaili critics. For the effect of the Mongol invasions was of a kind which has left its enduring mark in indelible impress upon the course of world history. The mingled drama of unsurpassed military genius and of an unstinted cruelty that was barbaric in every sense of the word and which was constituted by the Mongol saga, resulted in the wholesale obliteration of a great cosmopolitan civilisation, an act of vandalism as drastic as, and far more sudden than, the German migrations which accomplished the downfall of the Roman Empire and of the classical civilisation of ancient Europe (fourth to sixth centuries AD).

Indeed, in the whole course of known world history only one other such wholesale cultural obliteration is known to have occurred as terrible as that which overtook Muslim Asia at the hands of Jenghiz Khan and of his successors, *viz*: I refer to the equally sudden violent, drastic and ruthlessly cruel destruction which accompanied the annihilation of the native American Indian civilisations of Mexico, Yucatan and, in particular, of the Peru of the Incas, by the ironclad conquistadores of Cortes and Pizarro in the sixteenth century.

Born about 1162, Temujin created a formidable army out of the scattered Mongolian tribes and was named Jenghiz (that is, the perfect warrior) Khan by his admiring warriors. Probably the greatest single destroyer of life and civilisation in the annals of man, he must also be regarded as one of the world's greatest masters in the art of war, ranking with the great Arab warriors and his own successors, Tamerlane and the Osmanli Sultans, or, most aptly of all, with Chaka, the Zulu barbaric genius of war. For Jenghiz, though probably illiterate, evolved a science of war which now commands the respectful admiration of experts such as Captain BH Liddell Hart, who writes:

Fuller knowledge has dispelled the excuse of medieval historians that the Mongol victories were due to an overwhelming superiority of numbers. Quality rather than quantity was the secret of their amazingly rapid sequence of successes. Alone of the armies of their time had they grasped the essentials of strategy, while their tactical mechanism was so perfect that the higher conceptions of tactics were unnecessary.³

Jenghiz Khan had built up a vast empire stretching from the Pacific to the Caspian. After his death his lineal heirs ruled as overlords of this enormous dominion with the title of 'Khan of Khans'. Under their supreme jurisdiction ruled the junior members of the dynasty of Jenghiz, as Khans, or feudal princes. In 1256, a generation after the death of Jenghiz Khan, 'Emperor of all men', the 'Khan of Khans', was Mangu Khan, the second successor of 'the world conqueror' – by which appropriate title the contemporary Muslim historians always refer to Jenghiz Khan: whilst the Persian Khan was Hulagu Khan, next to Tamerlane in the following century, the most warlike and most ferocious of all the successors of Jenghiz.

In 1256 this warlike barbarian set out, in emulation of his great ancestor, upon his celebrated Western march, which was destined to equal in horror, bloodshed, arson and general destructiveness of life and of the treasures of culture, even his ancestor's most devastating achievements in wholesale rapine and destruction.

'They make a desert and call it peace' might, indeed, be taken as the appropriate and specific motto of these yellow warlords who originated that saying, as truthful as famous and later repeated by their Turkish successors, *viz*: that 'the grass never grew where their horses' hooves had trod'. Like Israel coming out of Egypt in the biblical narrative, fire blazed before them and lightened the path they trod; in this instance, the smouldering embers of burning cities and of a ruined countryside, whilst behind the yellow 'hordes', to mark their track, arose, amid clouds of wheeling vultures and kites, their peculiar style of architecture – tier upon tier of cold grim skulls towering heavenward in a grey gaunt ruin.

3. Basil Liddell Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled*, Edinburgh, 1927, p 7. I may add that the term 'horde' did not originally have its present meaning of a vast indiscriminate mass. Originally it simply meant, as it means today in North-East Asia, a Mongol encampment. Such temporary camps were and are small, on account of the rigours of the climate. For the same reason the Mongol armies cannot have been very large. As pointed out above, it was their extraordinary mobility which gave their terrified enemies the erroneous impression of locust-like numbers. I may add that the original and proper spelling of Tartar is Tatar. It was the terrified natives of Europe, when assailed by Sabutai, the general of Jenghiz, who invented the legend that their ubiquitous enemies were 'Tartars', that is, denizens of Tartarus, the classical nether world!

Powerless to create, omnipotent to destroy, the yellow squadrons passed over 'the ruins of empires', whilst life withered everywhere at their touch. If the Assassins killed retail, the invaders killed wholesale.

Asia west of the Ganges and Indus has never recovered, from that day to this, from the dread visitation of the armies of Jenghiz, Hulagu and Tamerlane.⁴ Thereafter the civilised scene shifted to Europe and to Christendom. 'Westward the course of empire takes its way.' Upon the fertile lands of Asia fell the light of death and of age-long desolation.

As the poet Pope wrote in another context:

Thy hand, great Anarch, bids the curtain fall,
And universal darkness buries all.⁵

Baghdad, the seat of the Abbassid Khalifat, still remained, despite its political decay, the chief centre of Muslim civilisation in the East. It was at Baghdad, accordingly, that Hulagu Khan aimed to strike. But before approaching the main objective of his Western march, Hulagu resolved by a cunning stroke of policy to win support among orthodox Muslims by striking a preliminary blow at the Assassins, now once again regarded with terror and execration by the entire Muslim world. Accordingly, before advancing on Baghdad, Hulagu resolved to exterminate the Assassins, and in 1256, when the last grand-master was barely seated on his throne, the Mongol armies appeared in the Caspian littoral. It is an eloquent proof of the hatred which the Assassins excited that the feudal princes of Persia unanimously supported even the dreaded Tartars against them.

The sequel demonstrated the degeneracy into which the Persian Assassins had by this time fallen. Only one of their well-nigh impregnable fortresses made any serious resistance: their first acquisition in 1083, Lamiasar, which held out for six months. The rest of the Ismaili fortresses were surrendered without a blow by the cowardly grand-master, on whose craven fears Hulagu played with ruthless brutality and perfidy; alternately cajoling him with promises of his personal safety, and terrorising him by the brutal massacre of hostages.

This typically Mongol policy met with complete success. On 19 November, Rukn-u'd-Din surrendered the impregnable fortress of Alamut without a blow. No sooner was all possibility of resistance at an end than with a Mongol exhibition of 'Punic faith', the whole Ismaili population was ruthlessly massacred, down to the babes in arms; whilst the superb library and scientific instruments, accumulated by successive Sheikhs of the Mountains, were committed wholesale to the flames. The last grand-master, who had been induced to surrender by the false predictions of an astrologer, was sent by Hulagu to 'the Khan of Khans', his feudal overlord, where he was at once put to death. The Great Khan reproached Hulagu with wasting horses

4. Helmolt wrote:

The murderous thrusts dealt by the Mongols struck Oriental civilisation to the very heart. Never since has it arisen to its former lustre; it has lived during the last six hundred years only in the reflection of its former achievements. The poetry of Persia, indeed, continued to flourish for a couple of centuries, but it no longer found an echo in the West; and finally it, too, died of its loneliness. — HF Helmolt, *The World's History*, Volume 3, London, 1904, p 370.

5. Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*.

for so unnecessary a journey! (The 'Khan of Khans' at this time was Mangu Khan, brother and predecessor of the great Kublai Khan, the patron of Marco Polo.)

Subsequently, in the beginning of 1258, Hulagu stormed Baghdad and put to death the last Abbassid Khalif, Al Mustasin, on 21 March of that year. The manner of his death well illustrates the peculiar Mongol combination of cruelty, treachery and superstition. The Khalif, who was notorious for his meanness, was first nearly starved to death in the midst of his vast treasure and was then wrapped in a rug and beaten to death with clubs, so as to avoid shedding the sacred blood of the successor of the Prophet! Ironically enough, the same astrologer who had persuaded the last grand-master of Alamut to surrender, likewise persuaded Hulagu, who feared divine vengeance, that it would be safe to murder the Khalif. Still more ironically, this double-dyed traitor was the author of a well-known book on ethics! Subsequently Hulagu overran Syria, but was defeated on the Egyptian border by the Mamelukes and forced to turn back in what was, perhaps, one of the world's decisive battles.

Thus, ignominiously, fell the power of the Persian Assassins that was for so long the terror of Asia. That they capitulated so pusillanimously is a sure indication that already the order was far gone in degeneracy. A modern traveller (Miss Freya Stark), who has made a personal study of the terrain of Alamut and of the other fortresses of the Assassins, tells us that, in her opinion, they were capable of an indefinitely prolonged resistance even to such formidable masters of the military art as were the Mongols. This was so of Alamut in particular, which was virtually impregnable.

Another authority describes the metropolis of the Ismailis: 'It is on a solitary rock, about three hundred yards long from east to west, very narrow, not twenty yards wide at the top, about two hundred feet high everywhere save to the west, where it may be a hundred.'⁶

Moreover, we learn that Hasan-ibn-Sabah had taken special precautions to cultivate the adjacent terrain so as to obviate any possibility of starvation. In resolute hands, such a mountain citadel should have been capable of a long and desperate resistance. Obviously, by the time of Rukn-u'd-Din, 'there was something rotten in the state of Denmark', for the Assassins had degenerated sadly, and were no longer the men they had once been.

In her interesting travel narrative, *The Valleys of the Assassins*, Miss Freya Stark, on the basis of personal observation, expresses the opinion that:

Until the sixteenth century, when Shah Abbas built the causeway along the Caspian shore, the region between the sea and the great road must have been almost impassable for any army... This valley with its great walls should have been impregnable: north of it, over the passes, the country was so indeed.

Miss Stark goes on to describe the formidable character of the Tartar armies of the period:

The Mongols were not a mere horde without engines of war. They carried out their sieges in a scientific manner, with Chinese engineers, and every

6. DS Margoliouth, 'Assassins', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1909, pp 138-41.

appliance, and special auxiliary troops familiar with countries unknown to themselves. Yet Lamiasar held out for six months, and the impregnable Alamut could, no doubt, have held out much longer, had not the last Sheikh Al-Jebal cravenly surrendered it against the wishes of its garrison.⁷

The fall of Alamut ended the Assassins, at least as a serious historical force, though Miss Stark and other travellers assure us that, despite the policy of extermination pursued by the Mongols, remains of the sect are still to be found haunting the desolate valleys around the scenes of their vanished greatness. In India a still prosperous community known as the Khojas is said to show traces of affinity with the Assassins. But in their historical significance as a revolutionary movement of conspiracy and terror – that is, in their sole interest for history – the order founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah, and which had for so long terrorised the East, ended abruptly and completely in 1255 at the hands of the Mongols.

That is, in Persia. In Syria the sect lingered somewhat longer, was never obliterated so completely, and today still reveals some traces of its existence. About the same time as the fall of Alamut, the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt took the matter in hand. The Mamelukes were mercenary soldiers of fortune famous chiefly for their formidable cavalry, who had driven out the Turks and ruled Egypt in the name of the last surviving Abbassid Khalifs, who had fled from Baghdad to Egypt. The Mamelukes now set to work to reduce Syria systematically.

In pursuit of this purpose the Mamelukes drove out the last Crusaders from the sea coast of Palestine. The last Crusade, led by Edward the First of England, took place in 1271–72.

Simultaneously, the Egyptian Sultans set to work to reduce the hill fortresses of the Assassins. As late as 1265 the Assassins were still sufficiently powerful to receive presents from European rulers. Egypt, however, had now taken the place of Baghdad as the metropolis of the Muslim world, and in 1273 the great Sultan Baibars, having defeated the Tartars and taken the last crusading strongholds in Syria,⁸ went on to capture the last fortress of the Assassins (9 July 1273). The Mamelukes, however, unlike the Mongols, did not exterminate the Assassins. On the contrary, Sultan Baibars favoured the sect and even made use of it for ‘professional purposes’, and a curious treaty is mentioned between his general, Qala’un, and Margaret of Tyre, in which the Egyptian undertakes that ‘no servants of his, with the exception of the Assassins, shall molest her’. The later Mameluke sultans continued to employ them, and as late as 1326 they held five fortresses, according to Ibn Battuta, the famous contemporary Moorish traveller. Their decline thereafter was imperceptible, and remains of the sect are still to be found in the valleys of the Lebanon, along with the Druzes and other still existing survivals from that bizarre chapter of Oriental history whence all these esoteric sects derive.

Today, however, ‘Ichabod’ (‘the glory has departed’) from the once terrible Assassins. The formidable slayers of the Sheikh Al-Jebal have become

7. Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels*, London, 1934, p 233.

Whether the Tartars possessed artillery and introduced it to the West is a hotly disputed question. They may have brought it from China. Guns were first used in Europe by the Arabs at the siege of Cordova in Spain in 1280. They may have learned their use from the Tartars. The English friar Roger Bacon (1214–1292) experimented with gunpowder: HWL Hime, *The Origins Of Artillery*, London, 1915.

8. Except Acre, which was saved by Edward of England and did not fall until 1291.

metamorphosed into the scattered groups of mild sectaries, who have little beyond the name in common with the ruthless killers of Hasan-ibn-Sabah and Sinan u'd-Din Rashid. The tale of the Assassins is a tale that is told. 'The lion and the lizard' haunt the rocky defiles of the Lebanon, where once the myrmidons of the Sheikh Al-Jebal passed to and fro on their silent errands of death.

Chapter XIII: 'All Is Permissible'

Essentially the Assassins were philosophic nihilists and their policy of terrorism was no more than 'protective colouring', to borrow an apt term from the biologists. Their philosopher-king, of the kind made familiar in Plato's *Republic*, reigned in an oasis of culture, guarded from the barbarous world by the daggers and poison of the da'is.

Wisdom defended by fear! Scepticism protected by fanatics! Free-thought subsisting in an age of faith, thanks to utter submission! This is nearer to the picture than the traditional secret society of murderous fiends. The fundamental error of Von Hammer-Purgstall and his followers is that they mistook a conservative, counter-revolutionary movement for a subversive and revolutionary one. Von Hammer-Purgstall, servant of the Holy Alliance, student of the arch-Catholic reactionary Joseph de Maistre, associate of Metternich, should have known that blind obedience and fanatical belief in divine right are not revolutionary, but counter-revolutionary, qualities.

The Fatimids were the conservatives of Islam, defending the divine right of the Prophet's descendants to rule over the Muslim commonwealth against the Umayyad and Abbassid interlopers. The Assassins owed their origin to the assertion of this true-blue principle of legitimacy. We will not have forgotten how Hasan-ibn-Sabah championed the cause of the legitimate Imam, Nizar, against his brother and murderer, nor how rigidly the principle of an indefeasible succession was enforced among the Assassins themselves; the seventh sheikh was forcibly prevented by the order from disinheriting his son, since the word of an Imam, once given, was irrevocable.

The Fatimids were conservative, but their era was the Golden Age of Islam. Witness the glowing testimonial by a learned modern orientalist:

Thus, the disappearance of the Fatimids, who brought about the triumph of the Ismaili religion in Egypt, concludes an era of prosperity, splendour and toleration such as the East will never again enjoy.¹

That the Assassins, inherited, and in the measure of their smaller resources, actually surpassed their Fatimid predecessors in their devotion to culture as well as to legitimacy, is definitely affirmed by another modern authority, who tells us:

The suppression of Nizar [that is, the son of the eighth Fatimid Khalif, Al-Mustansir – FAR] involved a definite separation between the Fatimids of Cairo and their court on the one side and the Asiatic adherents of Nizar's Imamate on the other, and so from 488 [AH] onwards the Assassins formed a distinct sect, as much opposed to the Fatimids and their followers as to the orthodox Muslims. The founder, Hasan-ibn-Sabah, had now fully organised that sect on lines which were in general outline imitated from the traditional system of the Ismailians, but differed in detail. There were grades and successive stages of initiation and the real beliefs of the higher grades were of the same pantheistic-agnostic type as

1. René Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis*, Paris, 1900, p 49.

in the Ismailian body, and similarly the members of those upper grades were keen students of the science and philosophy which had been derived from Hellenistic tradition. When the headquarters of the sect at Alamut were finally taken they were found to contain a vast library as well as an observatory and a collection of scientific instruments. In fact, we may say that the Assassins represented the highest level of scholarship and research in contemporary Asiatic Islam, if we can indeed regard them as being within the Islamic fold; an island of culture and learning in the midst of reactionary orthodoxy and actual ignorance, the result of the submerging of Asiatic Islam beneath the flood of Turkish invasion. Far away in the West a purer culture was beginning to dawn in Muslim Spain, but, in Asia, philosophy and science were being rapidly obscured by the reactionary flood.²

Accordingly, in the case of the Ismailis, we must distinguish sharply between 'means' and 'ends'. The 'means' of the Assassins expressed themselves in a ruthless and permanent terror. It is from this terror that their name derives, and it is with this that the popular mind traditionally couples the sect.

Nonetheless, in the consciousness of the higher grades of the order, terror was always a means, and never an end. Contrarily, the end was the pursuit of knowledge, both religious and secular, and the preservation of the higher culture of Islam in face of the successive waves of Turkish, Christian (Frankish) and Mongol barbarism, which were sweeping in a wave of destruction and terror over the great Muslim civilisation of western Asia.

Indeed, it would probably be correct to describe the Ismaili movement as *the defence mechanism of Islamic civilisation: the Islam of a state of siege*. Alamut and Masyaf stood out in all probability as cultural citadels amid 'the ruins of empires'; amid the unprecedented debacle of Muslim Asia that was going on all around them; in the midst of the violent overthrow of the most brilliant and humane civilisation which Asia, or, in all probability, the entire world, had known up to that time.³

2. Reverend De Lacy O'Leary, *Short History of the Fatimid Khalifat*, London, 1923, pp 212-13.

I may add that, before consigning Alamut to the flames along with all its cultural treasures, Hulagu Khan permitted the orthodox Persian historian, Ata Malik Juwayni, who accompanied his army, to inspect the books of the Assassins. It is to this historian that we owe our knowledge of their existence, along, in particular, with important citations from a standard textbook of the Assassins, entitled *Adventures of Our Master*, that is, Hasan-ibn-Sabah. But the ensuing destruction was carried out with Mongol thoroughness, for the Tartars 'left not a wrack behind'. The culture of this 'oasis' we only know at second-hand.

3. Both in the extent of its scientific knowledge and in the humanity of its social ethics, the Arab-Persian civilisation compares altogether favourably with its only serious pre-modern rival, the 'classical'. Arab-Persian civilisation was also fully equal to its ancient predecessor in the daring freedom of its thought, and in the extent of its political and economic activities. Only in creative genius it seems to have fallen below the great master of ancient Europe. It cannot be repeated too often that, from the fall of Rome to the era of the Crusades — 476-1099 — the centre of civilisation lay in the East. Compared to the great Muslim rulers, such as the Umayyads, Abbassids and Fatimids, even the greatest rulers of the Christian West — Charlemagne, Alfred the Great and William the Conqueror — were very 'small beer' when viewed in world perspective. Not until the advent of the brilliant Frederick Hohenstaufen, 1194-1250, himself a pupil of oriental culture, can it be said that the West had 'caught up with and surpassed' the Orient. The modern age, a period of ever increasing European ascendancy, has been for the East a 'dark age' of semi-barbarism and superstition, analogous to that which occurred in the West after the fall of Rome. Today, the East seems to be awakening again after its long sleep.

The eminent orientalist, Dr Margoliouth, characterises the esoteric theology of the Ismailis in these terms:

It is, however, certain that the system of the Ismailians was a conflation of philosophic pantheism, emanating from India, with the formulæ of Islam; and the doctrine whereby this process was facilitated, and which won them the name of Batinites, was that every text of the Koran had a hidden meaning, which was to be followed in a hidden sense.

The learned author goes on to describe the complicated numerology of the Assassins, which, in common with the rest of 'the sect of the seven', centred upon the mystic number seven. For example, there were seven reincarnations of the Deity, *viz*: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and Ismail, the seventh Imam, who was believed to have ascended 'to a secret place'. Each of these reincarnations of the Supreme Being was followed and represented by the succession of seven Imams; or vicars. Towards these reincarnations, though blindly revered by the rank and file of the order, the high initiates preserved an attitude of scepticism.

We learn that:

With regard to the existence of God they maintained a sceptical attitude, so far, at least, as 'existence' might be regarded as an attribute; for their public symbol was at times 'we believe in the God of Mohammed'. In their cosmogony the world of mind was said to have first come into existence; the world of soul followed, and then the rest of creation. A man's life is due to his being the receptacle of a partial soul which at death rejoins the universal soul.⁴

It is at once evident that a theological system of such a character is leagues removed from anything even remotely connected with the orthodox Mohammedan faith, with its rigid insistence on the unity of God and on the clean-cut and absolute distinction between the unique Creator and any and every created thing. A theosophical system of nature outlined above has far more in common with the mystical pantheism existent in India from time immemorial, than it has with Islam, which repudiates any idea of confusion between the divine and the human. And in particular, any idea of reincarnation has always been regarded as unutterable blasphemy. That reincarnation figured among the esoteric doctrine of the Assassins may reasonably be inferred from the use made of this doctrine by Sinan u'd-Din-Rashid in his dealings with the Syrian branch of the sect.

This esoteric theology was combined, as we have already seen, with a philosophical standpoint altogether favourable to the science and scientific culture of the epoch. It should, of course, not be forgotten that we are still in the times when Islam led the world in civilisation and, very particularly, in science, which the Arabs developed to a point far in advance of anything to which even the Greeks of the classical era had ever attained. It was only after the great cataclysm of the Mongol invasions, and with the subsequent ascension of the barbarous Turks over Islam, that

4. DS Margoliouth, 'Assassins', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1909, pp 138-41.

the Mohammedan world declined into the medley of scholasticism and obscurantism which has been its usual role in modern times.

Of the general scientific eminence of the classical Muslim culture, a well-known modern historian of civilisation tells us:

A competent scholar might furnish not only an interesting, but valuable book, founded on the remaining relics of Arab vocabulary; for, in whatever direction we may look, we meet, in the various pursuits of peace and war, of letters and science, Saracenic vestiges. Our dictionaries tell us that such is the origin of admiral, alchemy, alcohol, algebra, chemistry, cotton, and hundreds of such words... The Arab has left his intellectual impress on Europe; he has indelibly written it in the heavens, as anyone may see who reads the stars in a common celestial globe.⁵

We have seen above that the Sheikh Al-Jebal and his subjects were fully abreast of this remarkable cultural evolution which, however, culminated in a philosophic point of view widely removed from that of the orthodox followers of the Prophet.

What this point of view was, JW Draper tells us in another book:

To this spiritual existence the Saracens, following Eastern nations, gave the designation the 'active intellect'. They believed that the soul of man emanated from it, as a raindrop comes from the sea, and, after a season, returns. So rose among them the imposing doctrines of emanation and absorption. The active intellect is God.

The author then proceeds to demonstrate the affinities of this system with the (original) Indian philosophy of Buddhism, concluding that:

Philosophy among the Arabs thus took the same direction that it had taken in China, in India, and indeed throughout the East. Its whole spirit depended on the admission of the indestructibility of matter and force. It saw an analogy between the gathering of the material of which the body of man consists from the vast store of matter in Nature, and its final restoration to that store and the emanation of the spirit of man from the universal Intellect, the Divinity, and its final reabsorption.⁶

The Assassins, then, both by their esoteric theology of eclectic origin, and by their scientific culture, were obnoxious to the gathering bigotry and obscurantism which increasingly characterised the contemporary decay of Muslim civilisation.

But this was not the whole, or even the worst part of their crimes in the eyes of their contemporary world. Worse even than the crimes of free thought and scientific agnosticism were the 'crimes' of communism and ethical nihilism, which were freely charged against them, charges which united both the purse and the conscience of the orthodox world against these arch-heretics. These latter tenets in particular aroused against the heretics of Alamut and Masyaf the whole fury of 'law and order'. On the accepted principle that 'much smoke implies at least some fire', we may infer that

5. JW Draper, *The Intellectual Development of Europe*, two volumes, London, 1864.

6. JW Draper, *Conflict of Religion With Science*, New York, 1875, pp 138-40.

there must have been an element of truth, at least in these allegations. Nor is there any inherent lack of probability in them.

Dr HF Helmolt writes on this aspect of the secret doctrine of the Assassins:

It has also been shown that the heresy of the Ismailians developed out of a mixture of Mohammedanism and various other beliefs of which perhaps the most important were the communistic doctrines of the Mazdakites. The doctrines of the Ismailians were gradually transformed into an esoteric system of beliefs, which, in the hands of the most intellectual of its adherents, approached pure nihilism – the conception that all things are indifferent, and hence all actions are permissible – while the bulk of the believers lived in a state of mystic respect for their still more mystic superiors and leaders.⁷

The communistic tradition, then, may be considered as one of the sources of the secret doctrines of the Assassins. Who so considers the furious hatred which the doctrine of 'all things in common' has aroused in modern times in conservative and conventional circles – a hatred which has not infrequently found expression in the most outrageous lies and in the most fantastic slanders – will have no difficulty in comprehending that the charge of communism was not the least cause of that ferocious hatred with which the entire Muslim world regarded the disciples of Hasan-ibn-Sabah.

The communistic tradition was not original with the Ismailis and their offspring, the Assassins. As Dr Helmolt has indicated in the quotations set out above, a communistic tradition can be traced back in Persia at least as far back as the religious revolution initiated by the Persian reformer, Mazdak, in the sixth century of the Christian era. Of this remarkable man and movement we learn from another modern authority on the history of civilisation that:

From the fifth century onwards the dominant middle class, closely allied with the priesthood and nobility in the service of the papal kings, was menaced by a throng of exploited peasants, handicraft workers and slaves whom Mazdak endowed with a communist ideal. Kindred aspirations, embodied in religious sects, had been associated with Mani's reform in the third century, but this counterpart of Christianity in the Roman Empire had been suppressed. King Kobad, likewise a Messianic King, tried to establish equality between property by authority from above (500), and he was overthrown by the propertied classes.⁸

In Persia and the Near East the communistic tradition persisted underground in connection with successive religious sects of an heretical character. This phenomenon, one common to most pre-industrial societies, was particularly noticeable in Persia on account of the speculative and esoteric character of the people. The great Persian scholar, Professor EG Browne, has, indeed, aptly commented on these endemic Persian characteristics, his conclusions being that the

7. HF Helmolt, *The World's History*, Volume 3, London, 1904, p 360.

8. Herman Schneider, *The History of World Civilisation: From Prehistoric Times To the Middle Ages*, London, 1931, p 329. Persia, under Kobad, seems to have been the first large-scale state to have tried to put communism into practice. Prior to the nineteenth century, indeed, communism was inseparable from religious sects, generally of an unorthodox character.

natives of Iran (Persia) have a genius for producing heresiarchs and heresies in general, one unequalled by any other nation whatsoever, by even those ever curious Athenians, of whom that acute psychologist, St Paul, wrote that they were ever seeking after 'some new thing'. From Mani and Mazdak to those latest avatars of heresy on modern Persian soil, the Baha'is, the history of the Persian intellect bears out this contention of the eminent Cambridge orientalist.

A tradition of religious communism was closely associated with these successive movements. On this necessarily obscure subject we are informed by a French historian of socialism:

In 498, while Kobad was reigning in Persia, Mazdak, born, according to one account at Persepolis, at Nishapur according to another, announced that he was the Paraclete (that is the Holy Ghost) expected by the Christians, and taught a religious doctrine, a mixture of Buddhism, Parsism and Christianity, whose earthly manifestation was destined to be communism.

The King embraced this new doctrine, but the rich class in Persia revolted and tortured and massacred the communists by thousands.

In 502 an army of White Huns and communists overthrew the rich, rescued the King, and established communism in Persia. That lasted about forty years.⁹ But Kobad then died, and his son, Chosroes, after he had sold himself to the party of the rich, massacred a hundred thousand communists in a single day, and restored the rich to power. After this experiment nothing remained of communism in Persia except the memory of its apostles, Mani and Mazdak, whose names have been preserved by history.¹⁰

The learned author proceeds to trace the evolution of communism in Muslim times after the conquest of Zoroastrian Persia by the Arabs (631-651):

Despite the above, some remnants of Persian communism passed into the Arab lands and united with their eastern co-religionists. The most famous of such sects are the Babakists, the Zendians, the Ismailites and the Wahabis.

The Babakist, under the leadership of their chief, Babak, the impious, desired to destroy the ancient order by violence.

For twenty years they held out against the whole military resources of the Khalifs, spreading terror and slaughter throughout every part of the Arab empire.

In 837 they were exterminated in the suburbs of Baghdad. Their doctrine was free-thinking and communistic.

9. According to Schneider, Kobad, on his restoration, did not go beyond a moderate policy of social reform.

10. Mazdak perished in the above massacre. It is said that he was buried alive. Mani had been flayed alive by the Zoroastrian priests in 214. Evidently the Persian aristocracy were worthy forerunners of the 'holy' Inquisition and the unholy Gestapo!

The Zendians held that property is a crime, that no one ought to own anything and that no one ought to eat the flesh of animals. This sect was exterminated.¹¹

The Ismailites expected a new Messiah. They repudiated all the Mohammedan mummeries, practising communism in goods and women. Though defeated, the Ismailites were not exterminated, and the celebrated Assassins (from whom the word Assassin is derived), who under the leadership of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the Old Man of the Mountain, spread such terror among the Crusaders, were simply Ismailites.

That the communistic tradition ended in Asia among the Assassins can be gathered from the author's conclusions:

These violent revolutionaries left no successors in Asia and I have never heard of any Muslim social philosophers. Averrhoes (twelfth century) aptly observed that all societies had begun as democratic and equalitarian states, but he did not advocate any practical scheme for restoring this state of society.¹²

From sources such as the above, we are, then, able to form a clear picture of the secret society of the Assassins, such as it actually was in itself, and the resulting impression is, naturally, very unlike that which one obtains from contemporary accounts drawn up invariably by bitter and uncomprehending enemies of the order.

From the circumstantial evidence available, it can reasonably be inferred that the higher ranks of the order represented a community of savants and speculative philosophers which had some points in common with such communities as are depicted in the famous Utopias of Plato, Sir Thomas More and Campanella.¹³

In the midst of this darkening universe, of this world and culture fast crumbling into the arid ruin that has for so long been accurately designated by this term, the fortresses of the Assassins stood out as oases of light and splendour, the last strongholds, save for distant Spanish Granada in the remote West – whose Alhambra and Court of Lions outlasted the rest of Muslim civilisation by two centuries (1492) – of the Golden Age of the East, which lives forever enshrined in *The Arabian Nights* and in the haunting refrain of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyam.

For the great Muslim civilisation was going; night was falling fast on the many-domed palaces of the East; 'the night of the soul' was engulfing the free mind of Islam amid the bogs of an arid scholasticism and the all-effacing quicksands of a servile and authoritarian regime of commentary-compiling epigones. In this twilight age, the intellectual daring and the passion for experiment, for gazing afresh at the enigmatic figure of reality, which had characterised the great age of the Arab-Persian culture, were fast becoming unintelligible, and anything in the nature of

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11. Both Hani and Mazdak, in common with Buddhism, enjoined a strict vegetarianism. I have been unable to find any information bearing on this practice among the Assassins.
 12. Benoît Malon, *Histoire du socialisme depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours, ou efforts des réformateurs et des révoltés à travers les âges*, Paris, 1879, my translation. This book is extremely rare.
 13. The religiously inspired communism of the pre-industrial era is now known chiefly through its Utopias. This sub-species of literature, includes, to take only the most famous Utopias, Plato's *Republic*, Mores's *Utopia* and Campanella's *City of the Sun*.

nihilism and/or scepticism was regarded with the blind hatred characteristic of the moribund robots of a decadent 'Age of Faith'.

The Ismailis in general, and the Assassins in particular, came in for a full share of this blind hatred and miscomprehension. When to scepticism communism was added on the charge sheet which Muslim civilisation drew up against them, it is obvious that against the Assassins were united the two strongest feelings in the human breast: bigotry and cupidity. That in the view of this their name became a by-word among their orthodox neighbours, similar events and accusations made in our own day, enable us to comprehend them more easily.¹⁴

A single phrase was taken by the enemies of the Assassins as the summary and quintessence of their doctrine: 'All is permissible.' On the opinion of the orthodox Muslim world this motto of philosophic nihilism represented the heart and core of the secret doctrine of the Assassins as exactly as the modern anti-Catholic movements have identified the world outlook of the Jesuits with the still more celebrated phrase: 'The end justifies the means.'

Since, despite endless reiteration and innumerable researches, no one has been able to find the latter expression set down in black and white in the whole vast literature of the Jesuits, which is open for the inspection of the world, we may similarly infer that no Ismaili writer ever actually used the phrase in question, though, as in the case of the Jesuits also, the phrase used to describe their world outlook may very well have been *ben trovato*, even if not actually true.

The whole power and wealth of the 'dark age' of faith which, just then dawning throughout the Muslim world, was directed against the impious sectaries, nihilists in ethics, free-thinkers in philosophy and communists (and blackmailers!) in their economics.

The Assassins were virtually defenceless, if and when judged by standards of 'power politics'. Unlike their Fatimid predecessors, they had no great armies at their disposal; unlike their Jesuit successors, they had no world-wide institution, such as the Papacy, at their beck and call.

To secure their existence against the venom of a hostile world with whose vast resources they lacked the means to cope in the open field, Hasan-ibn-Sabah and his followers resorted to a technique of survival, derived indeed in part from the practice of their Ismaili (Fatimid) predecessors, but in the main original, and stamped with the mark of genius such as only a master-hand could bestow. For Hasan-ibn-Sabah understood, long before modern dialectics rediscovered these fundamental principles of thought, the cardinal principle of 'the unity of theory and practice' and 'the identity of opposites'.

Hence he evolved the unique means by the aid of which the sect that he founded was able to conserve its ends: by a technique of survival which was also a technique of terror; in which the very weakness of the order became its strength; in which humanism was defended by terror; scepticism by blind fanaticism; metaphysics by murder; the most emancipated science by the grossest superstition; in which all was, indeed, 'permissible' that conduced to the unique end, the survival

14. Not merely were the Assassins accused of having their wives in common, but also of practising incest. Modern analogies suggest that such charges were in all probability entirely false. Had we access to the literature of the Assassins, it is not unlikely that we might find there some such crushing answer as was given by the early Christian apologist, Tertullian, to similar slanders by the decadent Roman pagans of his day (200): 'We have all things in common, excepting only our wives, the one form of property which is common among you.'

of the free-thinking and communist 'Eagle's Nest' in the teeth of the infuriated orthodoxy of Church and State, of East and West, of bigoted Turks and fanatical Franks.

If science and speculation were the end of the Assassins, by a logic not of choice but of necessity, the mountain fortress and the dagger were the indispensable means by which alone a movement so far ahead of its time or, more precisely after it, could survive amid an age of iron in both East and West, where both Christian stake and Muslim stone consumed free speculation and silenced the apostate forever. In such an age all had, indeed, to be permitted in order to enable a handful of heretics to escape the fate of their predecessors whose grim fate we have noted above, Hani and Mazdak, Babak and 'the veiled prophet of Khorasan'.

Indeed, when viewed in this light, not of hostile denunciation but of actual history, the whole organisation and technique of the Assassins represents simply an illustration of the principle that, 'necessity knows no law'.

We shall now proceed to glance at that technique of terror whereby the Assassins both survived and stamped their name ineffaceably on the records of history. First of all, we may turn our attention to their organisation, which embraced both the ends and the means that were included in the movement directed by 'the Old Man of the Mountain'.

Chapter XIV: The Organisation of the Assassins

The main lines of the organisation of the Assassins followed upon the usual hierarchical initiation customary among secret societies in general. That is, a regular chain of successive degrees of initiation united the grand-master at the summit of the apex with the humblest initiate at the base of the esoteric pyramid. In the case of the Assassins, however, there was one significant exception to the usual run of such societies. The da'is, the rank and file – more exactly, the 'church militant' – of the sect were not merely ignorant of the 'secret doctrines' of the order, as outlined in my preceding chapter, but were actually organised for a very different purpose, that of terror, and even the actual execution of the homicidal acts whence the sect derives both its soubriquet and its popular reputation, a reputation which, as I have shown above, was quite subordinate to the real purpose of the order as conceived by the founder, belonged to its means and not to its ends. Indeed, as we have seen, the course of their contemporary history gave the Ismailis little choice but to be either hammer or anvil, to 'assassinate' or to be themselves butchered like defenceless sheep.

The peculiar divisions of the sect were entirely due to this fundamental necessity. Dr O'Leary gives us this concise summary of the hierarchical structure of the Assassins:

As organised by Hasan-ibn-Sabah the Assassins appear in six grades. The highest of these was filled by the 'Chief Da'i' (that is, Du'at) who recognised the Imam alone as superior on Earth... Amongst outsiders the Chief Da'i commonly went by the name of 'Sheikh of the Mountain', that is, of the mountain stronghold of Alamut which formed the headquarters of the sect, and this is reproduced as the 'Old Man of the Mountain' in the record of the Crusaders. Under the Chief Da'i were the 'Senior Missionaries' (da'i-i-Kabir), each supervising a diocese or bahr ('sea'), and under these were the ordinary missionaries. Thus far the organisation merely reproduced that already prevalent in the Ismailian propaganda. Beneath the missionaries were the ordinary members in two main grades known respectively as 'companions' (rafiq) and 'adherents' (lasiq), the former more fully initiated into the batinate or allegorical interpretations than the latter. The sixth grade, theoretically the lowest, was peculiar to the Assassins sect, and consisted of the (self) 'devoted ones' (da'is) who do not seem to have been initiated, but were bound to a blind and unquestioning obedience which has its parallel in the discipline of the various dervish orders, but was here carried to exceptional extremes. These da'is were carefully trained and were especially practised in the use of various forms of disguise, after all only a more perfect refinement of the methods originally evolved by the Ismailite missionaries; but these were not disguised for the purpose of acting more efficiently as missionaries and for penetrating different communities as teacher, but solely for the purpose of carrying out the specific orders of the Chief Da'i and thus formed a more formidable branch of what soon became an exceptionally powerful secret society. In many cases the acts entrusted to the da'is were acts of murder, and it is from this that the name of

'Assassins' has received its peculiar meaning in most of the languages of Western Europe.¹

We see from the above that the order founded by Hasan-ibn-Sabah was divided in a very sharp and clear-cut manner between the initiated members, who looked after the ends of the society – that is, the pursuit of knowledge and the delights of free speculation – and the da'is, the 'laity' of the order, its rank and file, who one could describe with literal accuracy as its 'manual workers'!

Broadly speaking, therefore, this bifurcation of the order into two distinct sections, corresponded with the fundamental division between its ends, adopted by choice, and its means, forced on it by the harsh necessities of the age of iron in which it lived. Among the Jesuits again and, still more exactly, among the modern Mormons of Utah, USA, we shall find this basic distinction in organisation reproduced under historical conditions which were similar in many respects (*vide infra*). Among the ignorant fanatics whom the Jesuits utilised for the 'taking off' of heretical monarchs, the Balthasar Gerards, the Jacques Clements, the Guy Fawkes, and among the Mormon 'Angels of Death', recruited from the ignorant farming population of the early nineteenth century in the 'Middle West' of the USA, we shall be able to observe numerous analogies with the da'is of the Ismailis, with the actual Assassins, those 'Destroying Angels' and ministers of vengeance of the order, and the cause of that far-reaching terror which it inspired – a terror which made kings tremble on their thrones and checked the angry anathemas of outraged orthodoxy.²

The founders of the Assassins were evidently adept in applied psychology. Otherwise they would hardly have lasted as long as they did: two centuries – 1090–1293 – was, after all, an enormous period for a diminutive sect to sustain a siege – for that is what its position *vis-à-vis* the outside world really amounted to – from the whole power of the Muslim world, led by such renowned soldiers and statesmen as Saladin and the Nizam-ul-Mulk, with the Christian Crusaders and the powerful military order of the Templars thrown into the ranks of their enemies as well. If modern military science regards the Duke of Wellington as a great defensive strategist on account of his defence of the Portuguese lines of Torres Vedras in 1810 for a few months against the French army of Marshal Massena, how much more praise is due to the founder of the Assassins and the Sheikhs of the Mountain, his successors, who held their fortresses intact against a hostile world both East and West of Islam and Christendom alike for two centuries!

The main distinction made between the initiates in the sect and the da'is corresponded with their respective tasks. The initiates, as we have seen, were rationalistic and speculative in their outlook upon the world. In fact, though their formulæ of initiation have not survived the destroying hands of Mongols and Mamelukes, it is virtually certain that each successive step on the hierarchical ladder represented a further step towards a complete intellectual emancipation, towards an all-embracing philosophical nihilism, an abyss of free speculation, in which all authority whatsoever, whether derived from God or man, divine revelation or human reason, the Koran or the canon law of Islam, was lost in a calculated agnosticism which reduced all law and all custom, even the most ancient and sacrosanct, to the common denominator of unchecked reason.

1. Reverend De Lacy O'Leary, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifat*, London, 1923, pp 213–14.
2. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, London, 1902, p 206.

The highest grades of the Assassins seem to have arrived at that ultimate stage of complete scepticism wherein they surpassed even that axiom of medieval rationalism, which had it that: 'An authority is worth – and only worth – as many arguments as he can produce.' Passing far beyond this stage of thought, the highest grades of Assassins, walking here in the footsteps of the most daring Hindu thinkers, reached that most advanced of all mental stages, that which interprets rationalism as necessarily connoting the right to doubt or to deny the sequence of logic and the rationality of reason itself.

As dynamic pantheists, as dialecticians who 'negated the negation', as, at least in theory, the upholders of a complete and uncompromising scientifically justified immoralism, the Assassins soared in their highest grades into a mental empyrean as dizzy in its tenuous intellectual atmosphere as was the physical atmosphere which they breathed in their mountain strongholds on the windswept peaks of the Caucasus.

Popular instinct rarely errs on such fundamental points. In any case, as I have shown elsewhere, pragmatism, the subjection of the intellect to the will, represents a permanent and unfailing characteristic of all counter-revolutionary movements, the conscious aim of which is to dam the running stream of history. The Assassins, the Jesuits and, in our own day, the Fascists, all demonstrate this common characteristic.³

Whilst the ends of the order were rationalistic and cultural in character, it is obvious that such could not possibly be the case with regard to the means employed by the sect to safeguard these same ends. Precisely the opposite: these means, so terrible, and yet probably the only means which would have served at that particular time and place, required first and foremost the precise negation of any and every sort of rationalism. Quite the contrary, that combination of qualities which the da'is – the actual 'Assassins' – required as a prime requisite for their grim profession was the precise opposite of everything and anything which savoured of free thought and moral reflection. If 'the Old Man of the Mountain' was the brain, the da'is represented the strong arm of the sect, and it is not the function of an arm to think, particularly when its chief function is to wield a dagger! The motto of the Light Brigade at Balaclava in Lord Tennyson's famous poem – 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die' – was the motto also of the 'self-devoted ones' whose highest duty was to die so that the order might continue to live.

The delights of free inquiry were not for such! Certainly their lord did not require this section of his followers to question the value or necessity of the special kind of acts which he commanded them to perform at the risk, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, at the certain cost of their lives! Not for such was the controversy which raged so vehemently about 'the two and seventy jarring sects', of whom old Omar Khayyam has written so disparagingly. For them, as for their Catholic successors, there was only 'the rule of obedience' and 'the lifelong sacrifice of the intellect'.

Like the Dervishes and the Jesuits, every da'is was a 'stick in the hand of an old man', 'a living corpse' to be turned about unresistingly at the command of the Sheikh Al-Jebal, his Imam. The hand that wielded the dagger must not be 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought', the more so as the wielder had, as a rule, but just time to strike once before he himself was struck down for ever.

3. See FA Ridley, *The Jesuits: A Study in Counter-Revolution*, London, 1938.

Accordingly, it is in no way surprising to find that all our surviving accounts emphasise the blind obedience of the 'Destroying Angels', and emphasise the careful direction of their training in order to ensure the development of this quality to the highest possible pitch. For example, the great Muslim theologian, Al Ghazali, in his 'refutation' of the sect, tells us that 'the Lord of the fortress of Alamut, our master', taught that man requires a teacher of divine authority, since he cannot know the truth merely by the use of unaided human reason. Not a very 'free' thought! Obviously not a part of the esoteric teaching of the Assassins, but one reserved for the uninitiated da'is.⁴

Having glanced at their organisation we can now note the technique of terror which proved so efficacious in keeping a hostile world at bay, and which has ineffaceably stamped itself on the etymology of so many languages.⁵

4. See DS Margoliouth, 'Assassins', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1909, pp 138–41.

NB: Al-Ghazali, *The Proof of Islam*, written about 1100, during the lifetime of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, for whom the honour of the expression 'Sidir' — 'our Master' — was reserved by the usage of the sect. As we shall see shortly, Marco Polo makes a special point of the blind fidelity of the da'is. The order could not, indeed, have survived long without it.

5. Note on numbers of the Assassins. In his book on the Saracens, Mr A Gilman informs us that, 'with fifty thousand men at their command, the Assassins became terrible to the Crusader, as well as to the Persians and Saracen'. But there cannot be any reasonable doubt that this estimate of the armed men at the disposal of the Sheikh Al-Jebal is very greatly exaggerated. We have already noted that really large armies were altogether exceptional at this period. As an example the crusading army of Richard the First of England, the most famous warrior in the Europe of his day and the ruler of half of France under feudal title, as well as England, numbered about sixteen thousand men in his most important battle. Yet both the Christian and Muslim chroniclers describe this army as the greatest host seen in their time. How then, could a handful of mountain forts situated in the most rugged and unproductive terrain have supported or contained the high population figure necessary to keep an army of fifty thousand men? This line of reasoning is confirmed by investigation of the measurements of Alamut, the most important and, in all probability, the largest of the fortresses of the Assassins. We have not forgotten that 'it [Alamut] is on a solitary rock, about three hundred yards long from east to west, very narrow, not twenty yards wide at the top; about two hundred feet high everywhere save to the west, where it may be one hundred'. What proportion of fifty thousand men could the small village which could alone be accommodated in such an exiguous space, have contained in what was, after all, the capital of the Assassins?

In actual fact, it is very unlikely that the total number of the sect altogether, including both its Persian and Syrian branches, numbered as much as the figure given above with regard to the da'is alone. A few hill forts plus some scanty hamlets in rugged villages could not conceivably give more than a most moderate figure. The Assassins owed the ubiquitous terror which they excited, not to their numbers, but to their mobility and to their superb organisation. Like the Iroquois of North America at a later date, a mere handful of men were yet able to cow vast areas of territory. This was due, above all, to that masterly technique of terror which forms the subject of my next chapter. The history of the Assassins constitutes a flat contradiction of the well-known saying of Napoleon that 'Providence is on the side of the big battalions'. Not in quantity, but in quality, lay the secret of the order of Hasan-ibn-Sabah.

In our own age the nearest parallel to the Assassins is probably the Irish Republican Army, equally experts in terror and certainly nowhere near five or six hundred in total membership.

Chapter XV: The Technique of Terror

The general position of the Assassins *vis-à-vis* their contemporary history will now be clear as the repository of everything hateful to the religious, political and economic orthodoxy of their order as nihilists and 'communists', 'who acknowledged no gods save time and fate, and who worshipped neither', the sect or order of the Assassins faced the unanimous execration of a world in arms; a world of Muslim bigotry, Turkish cupidity and growing barbarism, observed with unutterable loathing this 'Eagle's Nest' which had dared to lay its brood of monstrous eggs right in the very heart of the Muslim commonwealth.

Wherever they turned their gaze, from China to Spain, the iron wall of hatred confronted them. After 1172, when Saladin extinguished the Fatimid Khalifat of Egypt, they alone in the world were left of the dreaded 'sect of the seven', which, as reorganised by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, had split the Muslim world in twain.

Nor did the Crusaders, those fanatical war hawks from the West, take any more kindly to the 'abomination of desolation', perched on their northern boundaries; a monstrous cuckoo, of no recognisable shape, inspired not only by the devils peculiar to the followers of 'Mahound, the false Prophet', but also by other powers of darkness so strange and sinister that even the 'infidels' shunned and eschewed them.

Indeed, so great was the repulsion excited by this strange sect in the West, that from the day of their first associations with the followers of the Old Man, dated the beginning of the downfall of the haughty and powerful Knights of the Temple, whose associations with the Assassins of Syria gave rise to that loose talk of obscene ceremonies and esoteric rites of dark necromancy, which, disregarded at the time, grew to haunt the imagination of Europe and finally enmeshed the mighty Temple itself in its macabre toils and brought it to its final irrevocable ruin.

Thus the Assassins dwelt amid a ring of enemies, and of enemies who wielded resources in men, money and land with which the mountain-dwellers could not possibly cope with their handful of forts and scattered hamlets. A single province of the orthodox sultans Malik Shah, Saladin or Nur-ud-din contained incomparably greater resources than were at their disposal. Within their mountain strongholds it is altogether probable that there lurked the highest intellect and the most profound learning of their times, but their numbers were few and their resources were meagre. An age of iron, a Turkish 'dark age', was setting in. The example of many civilisations in East and West alike combine to demonstrate that, in ages of decay and collapse such as was just dawning in Western Asia, to be a torch-bearer of culture confers no immunity amid the general debacle. Rather does the lamp attract the moths of darkness with an irresistible propulsion towards it.

Alike in the decay of the ancient Roman world and in that of the medieval Arabic one, neither learning nor culture, neither sanctity nor genius, were any protection at all against the hordes of Hun and Vandal, Tartar and Turk, of Attila, 'the scourge of God', or of Jenghiz Khan, the 'world conqueror'. If the arch-heretics of the mountain wished to survive amid the debris of civilisation which was collapsing about them, 'they themselves must strike the blow'.

Their wits were sharpened by the direst necessity. For there was no doubt at all about the fate which awaited them if they failed to elaborate a way out from the

impasse that encircled them on every side. 'Ages of faith' are not prone to encourage their pupils 'to gang o'er the fundamentals' and indulge in free speculation.

In medieval times, no theologian in the Christian West had any doubts that 'the sin against the Holy Ghost' was the mortal guilt of heresy. In the Muslim East, if they did not believe in the Holy Ghost, at least they had no doubt whatever about the heinous nature of the deadly sin of heresy.

Neither medieval Christendom nor medieval Islam had the smallest compassion for heresy, nor gave the slightest shrift to its professors. The horrors perpetrated by the Inquisition during this self-same period are common knowledge. When the Crusaders stormed Jerusalem in 1099 they massacred eighty thousand unarmed inhabitants after all resistance had ceased, and burned the Jews alive in their synagogue. And these were the next-door neighbours of the Assassins! Nor were Muslim churchmen and their secular defenders much more merciful as a rule (Saladin certainly seems to have been an exception). But, in the main, both the Christian and Muslim world of medieval times would have agreed with that papal legate of the Crusade against the Albigenses (early thirteenth century), who, when asked to adjudicate between Catholics and heretics in a captured town of mixed faith, made his historic rejoinder in a single immortal phrase: 'Kill them all, my son. At the last day of judgement God will know how to distinguish.' Theocracy in a nutshell.¹

Indeed, if the Assassins had any doubts about their ultimate fate should they fail to protect themselves effectually, the example of their predecessors, the great Persian heresiarchs, Mani, Mazdak, 'the veiled prophet', Babak and the others already enumerated, would have been sufficient to resolve any doubts on the subject. In fact, if spiritualism formed part of their esoteric repertoire — as it seems likely in view of what we have seen about Sinan u'd-Din Rashid — an expert in necromancy could have shown their own eventual fate lit up by the burning towers of Alamut, when, at least, they met the Mongol variety of Assassins!

From Manito the Bab, Iranian orthodoxy had unfailingly destroyed the heretics of whom the land of Iran (Persia) has been so prolific. From Arnold of Brescia (twelfth century) to Giordano Bruno (1600), the Latin Church has known how to deal with heretics, and it was axiomatic in medieval Christendom that no faith need be kept with infidels. The Assassins were between the Muslim hammer and the Christian anvil.

An unkind fate had domiciled them on the borderline between the two great intolerant creeds. To survive in that milieu was their all-important problem. Their unique technique of terror — as I have styled it above — was their answer. If we don't visualise the actual situation which confronted them, we shall fall, necessarily, into the kind of romantic nonsense which historians of the traditional school talk about the 'crimes' of the order.

In point of fact, speaking as counsel for the defence, to which every historic movement is entitled, speaking — if one will as 'devil's advocate' even — I suggest that the crimes of the Assassins can be reduced to precisely two, *viz*: they lived when they did and did what they had to do in order to survive at all in such an age.

1. The Albigenses were a sect of Manichean-Dualistic origin, chiefly situated in Provence. Their specific tenets were generally similar to the heretical Persian sects described above. They were exterminated by a ferocious Crusade sent against them by Pope Innocent the Third, 1198-1216. As stated above, neither Muslim East nor Christian West had any treatment for heresy except extermination.

Endowed with a strong instinct for survival, they preferred to be hammer rather than anvil, killers rather than killed. Such, I suggest, were the main crimes with which history must charge them.

How was their defence to be organised? Their predecessors, the heretical Fatimids and Carmathians of Egypt and Arabia, had, by means of luck and cunning, come into possession of powerful states and numerous armies, with the aid of which they had kept the forces of the Abassid Khalifs and their Turkish 'mayors of the palace' at bay for a time. The Fatimids at the zenith of their fortunes had been the greatest rulers in the East and had disposed of an enormous army when judged by the modest standards of the age.² Even the Carmathians, brigands as they seem to have been, and apparently devoid of the high culture of their Fatimid predecessors, were strong enough to sack the Holy City of Islam, Mecca, and to play a considerable part in the robber-politics which characterised the decline of the Abbassid empire.

Yet both of these states, so far superior in power to the scattered groups of the Assassins, had succumbed to the enormous power of the commonwealth of Islam and of the sword of orthodoxy wielded by the potent Turks. Egypt had fallen before the great Saladin; the Carmathians had sunk under the unequal struggle and vanished from the historic scene about the time that Hasan-ibn-Sabah started his public career as a propagandist.

If these far more powerful movements had fallen, how could the Assassins, who had neither armies nor empire, hope to survive? As we have already noted, aided by modern analogies, the order probably owed its original creation to a revolt against the growing identification of the Fatimid rule with Egyptian nationalism. Organised accordingly on strictly propagandist lines, the followers of the Lord of Alamut had deprived themselves of any possibility of defending themselves by the use of the state power, or, indeed, of the possibility of open war resistance against the ever-present ferocious hostility of the world.

Open war is not, however, the only kind of war! It is upon this fundamental axiom that Hasan-ibn-Sabah and his successors based their entire technique, to which the sect owed its preservation, and Europe a new noun of terrible significance.

In its earliest beginnings the sect of the sheikhs of the Mountain had no distinctive name. It was then, as we will not have forgotten, merely the extreme wing of the Ismaili or Fatimid movement.

Hence, in the first instance, it was known merely as an Ismaili sect, or sometimes as the 'Batinat' sect, in allusion to its esoteric character. Soon, however, these titles began to give way to a new descriptive epithet of terrible and previously unheard-of significance. In the mosques and bazaars of the East, and in the most distant lands of the West alike, men began to whisper the terrible soubriquet which soon re-echoed through both the Muslim and Christian world as a name of dread: the sinister epithet of the 'Hashishin'.

Soon that name superseded all others and, as the Hashishin — *anglice*, Assassins — the followers of Hasan-ibn-Sabah entered the records of world history and of world etymology.

It was not until 1809 that the origin of the name 'Assassin' was finally placed beyond dispute by the eminent French orientalist, M Silvestre de Sacy, who in that

2. See Chapter III, *supra*.

year correctly traced the name to its origin in the use made by the sect of the drug, Hashish – Cannabis Indica – ‘the green parrot’, of the oriental drug traffic.³

The original technique of the ‘Hashishin’ centred upon the homicidal acts and threats of their secret killers, the da’is. The science of homicide represented the secret technique by means of which the universally-hated sect held at arms’ length a hostile world which they were too weak to resist by open force. Instead of armies, the Assassins relied on their technique of killing. They substituted the dagger for the sword and the pen. It frequently proved mightier than either!

While the technique of the Assassins centred upon the killer’s art, it must not, however, be supposed that actual murder formed their sole or even necessarily their most frequent activity. Far from this being the case, it seems generally probable that the art by means of which the Sheikhs of Alamut and Masyaf sought to conserve themselves was at least as much psychological as physical. For example, in the majority of cases, indeed probably in all except the most hardened, it was rather on the fear of death than on actual homicide that the Assassins relied for their effects.

Such brilliant psychologists as Hasan-ibn-Sabah and Sinan u’d-Din Rashid must have known, empirically at any rate, that ‘familiarity breeds contempt’. An effective terrorist must to some extent at least keep his use of terror in the background. If, as was the case throughout with the Assassins, their main objective was to terrorise and break the aggressive spirit of their enemies, then ‘the law of diminishing returns’ would have to be applied to the excessive use of the dagger. The horror of murder depends on its rarity! A murder in every morning’s news would soon become stale news!

In addition to the above, which is sound psychology and sound homicide also, for that matter, there was a further reason for a sparing indulgence in murder. ‘The Destroying Angels’ must live, at any rate in this world! This unimpeachable principle of economics is fully applicable to the manslayers of ‘the Old Man of the Mountain’.

A significant phrase in Marco Polo’s famous account indicates that the Assassins lived, in part, at least, by the imposition of tribute, or, to put it more bluntly, by blackmail, the traditional ‘baksheesh’ of the Orient.⁴ To judge from the wholesale bribery which seems also to have formed a regular part of their technique, the Old Man appears to have had a fair supply of ready cash. He could send out purses as an inducement to silence his critics, and appears on occasions to have paid regular pensions to foreign sympathisers. Such resources could scarcely have been acquired except by wholesale blackmail, by ‘the extortion of money by menaces’, and by the constant threat of sudden death. Otherwise we cannot see how the sect could conceivably have replenished its treasury. For example, the rugged defiles of Rudbar and the Lebanon mountains could not have given the Assassins more than a bare subsistence by agriculture, if even that. As the sect had no sea-ports, it was stopped from profitable commerce, even if other considerations, not to mention its inaccessible terrain, had not effectually debarred such profitable pursuits (see the similar practices of the modern Mafia, etc).

Only blackmail remained as a possible source of revenue. And one does not require to be an unqualified subscriber to ‘the economic interpretation of history’ to see that the sect’s exclusive dependence on this source of income imposed severe

3. See Silvestre de Sacy, *Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins et sur l’origine de leur nom*, Paris, 1809; Chapter XVI, *infra*.

4. See de Sacy, *Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins*; Chapter XVI, *infra*.

limits on indiscriminate assassination. It may be true that 'dead men tell no tales', but neither are they capable of paying blackmail!

The main features of the technique of terror which was habitually employed by the da'is of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' to keep the world at bay, is summarised by Dr Lacy O'Leary in these terms:

The da'is, trained to the use of disguise, some times as a servant or a merchant or a dervish, or as a Christian monk, was able to penetrate into almost any society and to strike down suddenly the victim marked out; and counted it a triumphant success if this act involved his own death as well. A deliberate effort was made to surround the sect with an atmosphere of terror; a Muslim prince would be struck down whilst he was acting as a leader at prayer; or a crusading knight as he was attending high mass at the head of his troops, or if there were not actual murder, a leader might wake up in his tent to find a message from the Assassins pinned by a dagger to the ground behind his couch, or a doctor of the law would find a similar message between the pages of his textbook from which he was lecturing. All this was developed more elaborately as time went on.⁵

When, however, the da'is did strike, they struck to kill and rarely bungled their stroke. Consumed with an ardour for paradise reminiscent of the irresistible early converts of Islam, they welcomed death in the attempt. Their more than Spartan mothers wept if their sons returned alive from their murderous errands. The Assassins it was in practice, if not in theory, who discovered that permanent truth of the art and science of conspiracy, *viz*: that even the most carefully guarded ruler can be killed provided, and only provided, that the slayer himself is willing to be slain.

It was their utter recklessness in this respect, their utter indifference to or, rather, longing for death, that made the veritably 'self-devoted ones' of the order a by-word for terror throughout the whole medieval world. The stoutest bars and the most vigilant guards were impotent to keep out these ubiquitous and absolutely fearless men who had no thought in life except to serve their Imam, the Lord of the Mountain, and no ambition except to pass through the transient agonies of death to the eternal bliss of the endless paradise of light, and of the ineffable joys of which the timeless vision induced by hashish had furnished them with a vivid foretaste.

5. Reverend De Lacy O'Leary, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifat*, London, 1923, p 274.

We may remember that it was a later grand-master of Alamut who 'patented' the technical refinement represented by the poisoned dagger and the purse of gold, which were deposited together by the bedside of the threatened man. An amusing story is told that an eminent professor of theology was accustomed to denounce the heretics of 'Alamut' vehemently in the course of his lectures. In due course he awoke to find the purse and the dagger, which a stealthy da'is of the order had placed beside his bed without awaking him. He took the hint! Thereafter his lectures were entirely innocent of any reference to the heresy and heretics of the Ismaili sect. On one occasion a zealous pupil asked the former scourge of the heretics why he no longer lashed out at their heinous errors, which previously he had missed no opportunity of roundly denouncing. To which the canny scholar made answer that he had been convinced it would be most unwise to do so; adding that the arguments which had led him to make this decision were both weighty and trenchant in character! It is satisfactory, in this instance at least, to be able to add a happy ending. The learned 'convert' received a pension from Alamut, which was faithfully paid for the rest of his life, as a reward for 'seeing the red light' in time!

It was the 'fine frenzy' of this Legion of the Lost (literally), in love with death, that caused even lion-hearted warriors, Muslim 'Ironsides' like Saladin, to retire shuddering from their enchanted castles, and which caused even the steel-clad Frankish Crusaders to turn pale beneath their massive armour at the dread name of the 'Old Man of the Mountain'.

The Sheikhs of the Assassins knew the value of the nameless dread which was excited by the utter contempt for death that was manifested by their da'is. Nor did these astute politicians neglect to encourage it to the full. After all, if the da'is wanted to be slain, it is the part of a good ruler to meet the wishes of his subject! Hence they impressed their occasional visitors with spectacles of a matchless fanaticism that had no counterpart in any Eastern or Western land, and which served besides as a silent but most effectual warning not, under any circumstances, to cross the path of the Sheikh of the Mountain.

The ensuing anecdote is told of Sinan u'd-Din Rashid, the redoubtable Sheikh of the Syrian Assassins.

On one occasion the Sheikh was visited by a well-known leader of the Frankish Crusaders, Henry Count of Champagne, and titular King of Jerusalem (then in the hands of Saladin). To impress his distinguished visitor, Sinan took him on to the battlements of Masyaf, which towered above the beetling crags of the Lebanon. While the Crusader was looking over the dizzy cliffs, Sinan suddenly turned to him and abruptly asked if he had any subjects as obedient as the Assassins; then before the astonished Crusader had time to reply, the Old Man turned to some lads in white who were standing nearby, and pointed silently over the edge. Instantly the boys leapt into space and were dashed to pieces on the rocks far below before the eyes of the horrified Count, who left Masyaf with memories of the Assassins which he was unlikely to forget in a hurry! It is evident from this example that the discipline of the Assassins went one better even than the 'corpse-like obedience' later practised by the Jesuits. Not only 'like a corpse', but into a corpse as well!⁶

It cannot be wondered, in view of such examples, that the hardiest warriors and the most cynical politicians quailed before this strange and superhuman devotion, and viewed this dream-drugged mountain eyrie with all the horror that an age of superstitious faith reserves for the super, or rather, the sub-natural, for creeping shadows and for ghost-haunted towers. In the lonely defiles of the Lebanon men felt instinctively that something more, or less, than human had taken up its abode. In the eyes of the entire medieval world, Christian and Muslim alike, the 'Old Man of the Mountain' reigned upon his gaunt grey rock like some demon spirit from the nether world; a replica of:

The wood in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign,
The priest who slew the slayer,

6. The story related in the text about the voluntary suicide of the Assassins is also told of other historical characters; for example, of Henri Christophe, the famous Haitian slave-leader and king, who eventually committed suicide with a golden bullet: see JW Vandercock, *Black Majesty: The Life Of Christophe King Of Haiti*, New York, 1928. While it may also be true in this latter instance, it could only represent a freak of senseless cruelty, whereas in the case of the Assassins it was entirely in keeping with their iron discipline and customary fanatical contempt for death, which make it inherently probable that the story is true.

And shall himself be slain.⁷

Such, in its main outlines, was the technique of terror, of death and of the fear of death, by means of which the Assassins both lived themselves and live in history. As we have seen, this technique belonged not to the ends but to the means of the order. Nonetheless, in the eyes alike of both their contemporaries and of posterity, these means have entirely obscured the ends of the sect.

Here, as so often, 'appearances are deceptive'. The cultural tradition, the freedom of thought, the science, the learning of the Ismailis, has been effectually screened by the barriers interposed by their mountain walls and by the glitter of the daggers of their da'is.

In this unique regime, in which, as we recall, science was screened by superstition, unchecked speculation by unlimited devotion, freedom of thought by measureless fanaticism, intellectual nihilism by political despotism, the enchanted gardens of Utopia by the 'art' of the midnight stabber: only its technique of survival, its protective covering, was apparent to its contemporaries. The hidden reality, the secret of this secret society, remained entirely unknown, and even now has to be inferred from the circumstantial evidence available in the lack of any direct evidence.

Mongol ruthlessness and Muslim bigotry did their work of destruction only too well. For that matter, in Catholic Europe, where there were no Mongols, we know but little more about the heretical sects who flourished contemporaneously with the Assassins. In an 'age of faith' such as was the medieval era both Muslim East and in Christian West, the heretic is 'an enemy of society', who has no rights, not even to an obituary notice!

The technique of the Assassins, however, revolved around their name. This name itself, bound up with their most peculiar custom, calls for a brief investigation.

7. Thomas Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, New York, 1897. As we have seen, parricide was also by no means unknown among the Sheikhs of the Assassins.

Chapter XVI: A Dissertation on Hashish

It was in the year 1809, in Napoleonic France, that the riddle of the origin of the world-famous term, 'Assassin', was finally solved. For on 7 July of that year the eminent French orientalist, Silvestre de Sacy read his epoch-making thesis on the question at the meeting of the Institute of France. This paper appeared in the official French Gazette, *Le Moniteur*, no 2103, on 29 July 1809. Subsequently, a letter from the same savant was published by the paper in question, defending his conclusions against the criticisms of other scholars. Since that time the learned world of oriental studies has considered that the question of the origin of the name 'Assassins' has been definitely closed.

It may be said to be now certainly established that it arose in the first instance from the real or alleged association of the sect of the 'Old Man of the Mountain' with the drug known as hashish or *cannabis indica*, with which the actual man-killers of the order were, or at least were reported to be, drugged before being sent out on their murderous errands.¹

Prior to this time many fanciful explanations of the word had been advanced by oriental scholars in supposed explanation of the term. But De Sacy finally settled the question. Professor Browne, one of his most distinguished successors in this field of oriental studies, summarises his predecessor's important discovery in these terms:

The etymology of the name 'Assassin' was long disputed, and many absurd derivations were suggested. Some supposed it to be a corruption of Hassan-iyum (yin) or 'followers of Hassan'. Caseneuve proposed to connect it with the Anglo-Saxon word seax, 'a knife'; and Gebelin wished to derive it from Shah-in-Shah (for Shah-an-Shah) 'King of Kings' [that is, the ancient title of the Achaemenian and Sassanid kings of Persia – FAR], while many equally impossible theories were advanced. It was reserved for that great scholar, Silvestre de Sacy, to show that the word, variously corrupted by the Crusaders (through whom it came to Europe) into Assassini, Assessini, Assissini and Heissessini, was more closely represented by the Greek chroniclers and most accurately of all by the hashishin of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela [*vide* next chapter – FAR]; and that it stood for the Arabic hashishin (in the plural hashishiyyin or hashishiyya), a name given to the sect because of the use which they made of the drug hashish, otherwise known to us as 'Indian hemp', 'bhang' or '*cannabis indica*'. This drug is widely used in most Muhammedan countries from Morocco to India at the present day, and allusions to it in Jala-lu'd-Din-Rumi, Hafiz and other poets show that it has been familiar to the Persians since, at any rate, the thirteenth century of our era. But, at the epoch of which we are speaking, the secret of its properties seems to have been known in Persia only to a few – in fact, to Hasan-ibn-Sabah

1. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) was a French orientalist; he wrote a standard work on the Druzes of Mount Lebanon. An eminent Arabic scholar. Created a peer of France in 1832. One of the founders of the well-known 'Société Asiatique'.

and his chief confederates, amongst whom, we may recollect, was at least one physician.²

As we shall see from the famous description given by Marco Polo, hashish also belonged not to the ends of the order but to its means. That is, it was only given to the uninitiated members of the sect; to the da'is, to the actual killers, and then only as an 'emergency ration' before actually 'going over the top' on their murderous errands. (In the World War of 1914-18 rum and other narcotics were similarly employed to stupefy the critical faculty of infantrymen before they actually went over their trench parapets into action.)

It is clear, then, that the consumption of hashish did not form any part of what we should call the normal routine of the sect. Probably the 'Old Man of the Mountain' himself and his higher initiates – indeed, all who 'counted' in the internal affairs of the sect – never imbibed it from one year's end to another. Even among the da'is its use could not have been very familiar, nor its joys blunted through frequent use, for it seems to have been reserved exclusively for the picked men who were actually sent out to do the killing, and who but rarely returned.

Hence it is unlikely that the average Assassin, even the 'destroying angels' themselves, knew much about this drug, to the use of which De Sacy tracked down the name given to themselves by history. To the average da'is the vision induced by hashish resembled the beatific vision of the mystics: a phenomenon known by repute to all, but rarely witnessed in actual deed! At least, so it would appear from the account given by Marco Polo, a witness whose veracity and general reliability are now very highly regarded by competent authorities.

That the consumption of hashish cannot possibly have formed a regular feature of the normal routine of Alamut and Masyaf is made virtually certain by the nature of the effect which this drug produces on its addicts if partaken of in lavish quantities. In this latter connection, Professor Browne goes on to tell us:

It must not, however, be supposed that the habitual use of hashish was encouraged, or even permitted, amongst his followers by the 'Old Man of the Mountain', for its habitual use causes a lethargy, negligence and mental weakness which would have fatally disqualified those to whom it was administered from the effective performance of the delicate tasks with which they were charged, and its use was confined to one of the grades or degrees into which the Ismaili organisation was divided.³

The *Encyclopaedia Medica* summarises the effect of hashish (*cannabis indica*) on its addicts as follows:

The action of this drug is first of all stimulating to the central nervous system, causing an intoxication analogous to that produced by alcohol, so that, when taken by Orientals it may cause them to run amok. Larger doses are followed by lassitude, muscular weakness, and eventually sleep. During this sleep the patient has revolting dreams.⁴

2. Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, London, 1902, pp 204-05.

3. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 2, pp 205-06.

4. 'Cannabis Indica', *Encyclopaedia Medica*, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1899.

The article goes on to emphasise the bad effects of the excessive use of this drug.

To these authoritative explanations I may add that this drug was particularly useful to 'the Old Man of the Mountain' because of another of its peculiarities, which neither of my authorities (quoted above) has recorded. Hashish produces a sense of distance, of timelessness – in religious language, of eternity; that is, of an endless, boundless, timeless world, which an astute religious leader could easily represent to his fanatical followers as a replica and foretaste of eternity. It may very well have seemed to that most astute psychologist who founded the order that for the ends which he had in view this effect of 'the green parrot' – as this terrifying concoction was known locally in Persia (Iran) – was not the least useful or potent for producing and for stimulating the latent fanaticism of his deluded followers, when about to face their supreme ordeal of self-immolation on behalf of the order.⁵

We can see from the above that here, as so often elsewhere, 'appearances are deceptive'. It was solely from its technique, and not from the cultural tradition and 'secret doctrine' which that technique existed merely in order to conserve, that the order or secret society of the Assassins derived the famous soubriquet under which it has passed into history.

To defend the right of its 'Mahatmas' to indulge in the boldest speculations with regard to God, man and nature, it was necessary, under the concrete conditions of the twelfth century, that the fanaticism of the believer should be artificially stimulated, his credulity be deliberately played upon, and the last remnants of his reason be artificially eliminated by noxious stimulants.

By thus identifying the freedom of the intellect of one part of its members with the complete abasement and self-sacrifice in another, the Assassins anticipated, besides actually illustrating in a most effective manner, the modern thesis of the German philosopher, Hegel (1770–1831), adumbrating that conception of dialectics which has it that 'opposites are identical'.

If for Hasan-ibn-Sabah and his intimates 'the riddle of the universe' could only be stated but could not be resolved by any revelation or act of faith, their right to doubt or to deny the precepts of the Koran could only be secured by a faith, a mental intoxication, and a blind devotion on the part of their Assassins, which went far beyond anything that the stiffest orthodoxy of Islam enjoined upon its most zealous votaries. Only the crassest superstition, inflamed by the most potent drugs, could have nerved the da'is to consummate those desperate deeds which alone enabled the mountain oases of free-thought to survive in an age of faith and of ferocious intolerance.

To be sure, this technique of 'casting out Beelzebub by means of Beelzebub', of subduing fanaticism by a frenzy yet more intense, was not invented by Hasan-ibn-Sabah, but can be traced right back to the original genius of the Ismaili 'sect of the seven'. We will not have forgotten how Abdullah-ibn-Maymun had, two centuries before the foundation of the sect of the Assassins, discovered how 'to bind together in one association the conquered and the conquerors', to combine in one secret society, wherein there should be several grades of initiation, the free-thinkers who

5. I am indebted to my friend, Dr RL Worrall, HBCH, for this latter piece of information regarding the effects of hashish. The same scholar has kindly supplied me with an American authority who indicts hashish as a regular stimulant in habitual use among neurotic young Americans of both sexes leading habitually to murder, violence and suicide. As will be seen shortly, this confirms Marco Polo's famous account – long regarded as legendary – of the specific use of the drug by the Old Man in 'tuning up' his (actual) Assassins.

saw in religion only a curb for the common people, and the bigots of all sects, '*to make use of the believers to bring about the reign of the unbelievers*'.⁶

The last sentence, which I have placed in italics, formed undoubtedly the starting point of the organisation and of the technique of terror of the Assassins themselves, with whom the Ismaili tradition culminated. The hashish-drugged slayers of the Pontiff of the Assassins, who ran amok in drugged frenzy and suffered torture and death blindly, so that Alamut and Masyaf might remain as the last refuges of intellectual freedom beneath the darkening skies of a decadent Asia, surely represented a stroke of genius on the part of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the very incarnation of the aim of his great predecessor, Abdullah-ibn-Maymun, 'to use the believers to bring about the reign of the unbelievers'.

There is no more astonishing juxtaposition in all history than this combination, side by side, of the most sceptical nihilism and the most inflamed bigotry than was to be found in the ranks of the followers of 'the Old Man of the Mountain', among whom 'all was permissible', even 'suicide while of unsound mind'!

Whereas, however, the Hindu votaries of the Juggernaut also ran amok under the influence of bhang (hashish), and immolated themselves, as is well known, beneath that Dravidian deity's triumphal car, the da'is of the Assassins practised active suicide, so to speak, for they died killing. How this last act was undertaken we may learn from the testimony of Marco Polo and other contemporaries.

6. Reinhart Dozy, *Histoire des Musulmans d'Espagne, jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides (711-1110)*, Volume 3, Leiden, 1861, pp 8 et seq; see Chapter II, *supra*.

Chapter XVII: Testimony of Benjamin of Tudela and Marco Polo Regarding the Assassins

For the Muslim, the Sheikh-al-Jebal was an 'abomination of desolation standing where it ought not', viz: in the heart of Islam. For the Christian, the 'Old One', though sinister, was almost picturesque, and took his place with 'Prester John', the priest-king, in medieval mythology.

The impact of the splendid East on the boorishly squalid West drew men eagerly to the Levant and inspired many a traveller's tale, and the Assassins came in for a full share of these yarns. What could be more extraordinary than the reality? A society of savants ringed round by daggers and hidden in the heart of the mountains! Yet most of the reports are fantastic and unworthy of credence.

There are, however, two contemporary accounts of the regimes of, respectively, Masyaf and Alamut, which stand out far above the general run of such travellers' tales. I refer to the account of the downfall of the order. In view of their interest and general accuracy, a glance may usefully be directed at the accounts of these travellers.

Benjamin of Tudela was a Jew from Moorish Spain who visited Palestine in the course of extensive travels during 1160-73. He was a Rabbi, or according to another account, a merchant. *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* comments that he had 'a keen interest in all things, and possessed a clear insight into the conditions and history of the countries he traversed'.¹ The same authority goes on to tell us that 'he treats of the Druzes and Assassins with great shrewdness'. In general, this narrative ranks high among medieval records of travel. (Benjamin would be well fitted to understand what was going on in the Muslim lands which he visited, for Spain, when he wrote, was still partly in Moorish hands, and the Jews played a leading role in the brilliant culture of Muslim Spain.)²

Benjamin of Tudela tells us that he passed near Mount Lebanon, where:

In this vicinity reside the people called Assassins, who do not believe in the tenets of Mohammedanism but in those of one whom they consider like unto the prophet Kharmath [sic: that is, the founder of the Ismaili robber-state of the Carmathians — FAR] they fulfil whatever he commands them, whether it be a matter of life or death. He goes by the name of Sheikh-al-Hashishin, or their Old Man, by whose commands all the acts of these mountaineers are regulated. His residence is in City of Kadmus, the Kedemoth of scripture, in the land of Sichon.³ The Assassins are faithful to one another by the command of their Old Man, and make themselves the dread of everyone, because their devotion leads them gladly to risk their lives, and to kill even kings when commanded. The extent of their country is eight days' journey.

1. *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, Volume 3, New York and London, 1901, p 35.

2. See Joseph MacCabe, *The Splendour of Moorish Spain*, London, 1935. Many leading Jews, Maimonides, Hasdai Crescas, etc, lived there, and there religious toleration, alone in Europe, was the rule.

3. Kadmus was a minor fortress of the Assassins, and the Sheikh may have been there at the time that Benjamin passed it. Masyaf was, of course, the metropolis of the Syrian Assassins.

The traveller did not visit the Sheikh or remain in their territory, since they were then at war with the Christians, who still held Jerusalem at the time that Benjamin visited the Holy Land.⁴

Our second and more famous witness is Marco Polo, the renowned Venetian traveller (1254–1324), who quitted his native republic – then and for long after the leading maritime state in the West – in 1269, and spent many years with Kublai Khan, the celebrated Tartar emperor of China, and in other Asiatic lands. His account of the Assassins, written within a generation of the fall of Alamut, and at a time when the sect existed in Syria, is, therefore, of special interest, particularly as its main source came probably from the accounts of their Mongol conquerors themselves. We will not have forgotten that Mangu Khan, who put the last grand-master of the Assassins to death, was the brother and immediate predecessor of Kublai Khan.⁵ Marco Polo, who wrote his travels only after his return to Venice, also visited Persia and knew the successors of Hulagu Khan, the actual destroyer of Alamut.

I may add that his account is now usually regarded as substantially reliable, and is without doubt a literary masterpiece of crisp and vivid expression; one of the finest passages, indeed, in the entire realm of travel literature. I quote from the translation made by Professor Browne:

The Old Man [says he] was called in their language Aloadin (that is, the seventh Sheikh of Alamut – 1221–55 – Ala-u’-d-Din).⁶ He had caused a certain valley between two mountains to be enclosed and had turned it into a garden, the largest and most beautiful that ever was seen, filled with every variety of fruit. In it were well-erected pavilions and palaces, the most elegant that can be imagined, all covered with gilding and exquisite painting, and there were runnels, too, flowing freely with wine and milk, and honey and water, and numbers of ladies, and one of the most beautiful damsels in the world, who could play on all manner of instruments and sing most sweetly and dance in a manner that was most

4. See Thomas Wright, *Early Travels in Palestine*, London, 1848, p 78. Mr Wright, in his capacity as editor, adds a note to the effect that the Carmathians believed that the soul of the head of the sect passes into his successor at death. The same doctrine, of course, still exists with regard to the Dalai Lamas of Tibet. I have not been able to trace any similar belief among the Assassins, but such a doctrine is not unlikely, and would explain the otherwise puzzling frequency of parricide among the Sheikhs of Alamut.

5. Kublai Khan is known to countless readers of ST Coleridge by the lines:

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan,
A stately pleasure dome decree,
Where Alph the sacred river ran,
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

6. ‘Aloaddin’ and Aladdin. We have already had occasion to notice above (Chapter XII, *supra*) that ‘Aloaddin’ – *viz*: Ala-u’-d-Din, the seventh grand-master of Alamut – was a weak ruler whose long reign coincided with the decadence of the Assassins. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that one account equates him with the world-famous Aladdin, the hero of ‘open sesame’ and the famous lamp. Such an ascription is entirely in keeping with the quasi-magical character ascribed, in general, to the Old Man of the Mountain, though serious chronological difficulties must be allowed to militate against this otherwise probable derivation. (See an interesting anonymous article ‘Secret Societies of the Middle Age’ in *Chamber’s Papers for the People*, 1880, where the above identification is upheld.)

charming to behold. For the Old Man desired to make his people believe that this was actually paradise. So he fashioned it after the description that Mahomet gave of his paradise – to wit, that it should be a beautiful garden running with conduits of wine and milk and honey and water, and full of lovely women for the delectation of all its inmates. And, sure enough, the Saracens of those parts believed that it was paradise.

Now no man was allowed to enter the garden save those whom he intended to be his Ashishin [that is, the da'is – the actual Assassins – FAR]. There was a fortress at the entrance strong enough to resist all the world, and there was no other way to get in. He kept at his court a number of the youths of the country, from twelve to twenty years of age, such as had a taste for soldiering, and to these he used to tell tales about paradise, just as Mahomet had been wont to do; and they believed in him, just as the Saracens believe in Mahomet. Then he would introduce them into this garden, some four or six or ten at a time, having made them drink a certain potion [*viz*: hashish – FAR] which cast them into a deep sleep, and then causing them to be lifted and carried in. So when they awoke they found themselves in the garden.

When therefor, they awoke and found themselves in a place so charming, they deemed that it was paradise in every truth. And the ladies and damsels dallied with them to their hearts content, so that they had what young men would have and with their own good will would they never have quitted the place.

Now this prince, whom we call the Old One [that is, *Le Vieux* – FAR], kept his court in grand and noble style, and made these simple hill-folk about him believe firmly that he was a great prophet. And when he wanted any of his Ashishin to send on any mission, he would cause that potion whereof I spoke to be given to one of the youths in the garden, and then had him carried into his palace. So when the young man awoke he found himself in the castle, and no longer in that paradise, whereat he was not over-well pleased. He was then conducted to the Old Man's presence and bowed before him in great veneration, as believing himself to be in the presence of a prophet. The prince would then ask him whence he came, and he would reply that he came from paradise, and that it was exactly such as Mahomet has described it in the law. This, of course, gave the others who stood by, and who had not been admitted, the greatest desire to enter therein.

So, when the Old Man would have any prince slain, he would say to such a youth, 'Go thou and slay so-and-so, and when thou returnest my angels shall bear thee into paradise. And shouldst thou die, nathless even so will I send my angels to carry thee back into paradise.' So he caused them to believe, and thus there was no order of his that they would not affront any peril to execute, for the great desire that they had to get back into that paradise of his. And in this manner the Old One got his people to murder any one whom he desired to get rid of. Thus, too, the great dread that he inspired all princes withal made them become his tributaries, in order that he might abide at peace and amity with them.⁷

7. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, London, 1931

Such is the most famous reference to the Assassins in world literature. Nor is there any reason to doubt that it is true, at any rate in substance. The combination of mysticism and trickery, the vast gulf between the Sheikh and the simple da'is, even the economic foundation of the order on blackmail, all these are not only possible, but, as we have seen, are practically certain; and *ipso facto* an atmosphere of credibility surrounds a narrative, which, like that of Marco Polo, emphasises them so clearly.

Indeed, no part of the shrewd Venetian's narrative, we may affirm, is in any way improbable, at least to one who has imbibed the fantastic atmosphere in which the order of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' 'lived, moved, and had its being'. The account quoted above reproduces this strange *mise-en-scène* so vividly that I suggest it could only be seriously questioned by people – including, no doubt, some of its academic critics! – who themselves lived in an atmosphere so remote from the nightmare horizon of the mountain citadels of the secret society that they simply could not credit its existence.

I have already suggested that the Near Eastern lands between the Lebanon and the Euphrates are richer, perhaps, than any other in sects of strange shape and fantastic hue. Even today the still surviving Druzes and Gnostic sects who inhabit this terrain – the Satan-worshipping Yezidis, in particular represent what is, to Western eyes at any rate, an utterly 'Alice-in-Wonderland' exhibition of unbelievable freakishness.⁸ The Assassins, who added to grotesque theosophy the deliberately conceived technique of a lurid logic of terror, represented, undoubtedly, the most incredible of all these sects; in fact, they serve as a perpetual reminder that 'truth is stranger than fiction'.

I conclude, then, that Marco Polo, the hard-headed citizen of a state renowned for its shrewdness, reported accurately what had been the actual practice of the famous sect of 'enemies of society', who had but so recently ceased to exist at the time when he wrote. Indeed the greatest of all authorities on the Assassins, Sylvestre de Sacy himself, remarks, apropos of Marco Polo's narrative:

Even if we admit some degree of exaggeration in the narrative of the Venetian traveller, if even instead of believing in the existence of these enchanted gardens, the existence of which is, however, confirmed by several other writers, we reduce all the marvels of this magical residence to a vision, a product of the exalted imaginations of these young men inflamed by hashish, and who since childhood had been filled with the hope of this reward, yet it would still be no less true that we encounter here the use of a liquor intended to stupefy the senses, and under the influence of which it would be impossible to distinguish the nature of

8. On the Yezidis, see RVH Empson, *The Cult of the Peacock Angel: A Short Account of the Yezidi Tribes of Kurdistan*, London, 1928; and Y Menanti, *Les Yezidis*, Paris, 1879.

If the account given by Marco Polo seems to be, at first sight, too grotesque for ready credibility, we must remind the reader that it would not be easy, for sheer fantasy, to surpass the Yezidis, the (so-called) devil worshippers, that queer Magian sect who still survive in the vicinity of Mosul. What are we to make, at first sight, of a sect which *inter alia* worships Satan under the form of a peacock, venerates the serpent as sacred to the sun and regards the colour blue as unholy? Yet this cult exists today, and has been observed at first hand by qualified European students whose accounts are extant. We can only conclude that the boundary of earth and heaven is a dim land, which throws distorted and frequently grotesque shadows!

one's employment, a liquor whose abuse, moreover, is still to be met with in a great part of Asia and Africa.⁹

However, even this guarded qualification seems superfluous. We have seen above that most of the details given by Marco Polo are quite in line with the order's leading features, as we have had occasion to observe them in the course of this narrative. Why not, therefore, accept the existence of the magic garden also? It fits into that realistic freakishness which marked so sharply the whole regime of 'the Old Man of the Mountain'.

It is, in fact, altogether probable that 'our master, the Lord of Alamut' would make a special point of playing upon and utilising the orthodox beliefs of Islam already present in the minds of his simple rustic followers. We know the sensuous conception of paradise — 'a land flowing with milk and honey' — as conceived by popular Muslim eschatology, and the 'lovely ladies' in the gardens of Alamut look very much like a deliberate imitation of the angelic houris, those celestial beauties of paradise reserved solely for the eternal gratification of the 'true believer', fallen for the faith in the 'Jihad' or 'Holy War' of Islam.

We know, and Hasan-ibn-Sabah must have known also, the frenzied fanaticism which the vision of these celestial beauties had aroused among the early champions of Islam, the warriors of Mohammed, Omar, Khalid and Ali, who so often rushed to certain death, crying out that they saw the celestial houris beckoning to them beyond the forest of infidel spears. What better method could the greatest psychologist in the entire history of terrorism have devised than this vision of paradise and its traditional delights seen on earth, to nerve the doglike devotion of his simple da'is to deeds more solitary, difficult and desperate than were even those of the crusaders of Omar.

When viewed from this angle, Marco Polo's story seems altogether credible, and the 'earthly paradise' of the Mountain must be ranked among the authentic psychological masterpieces of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, that profound student of the human heart, who had grasped the age-long truth that superstition is the oxygen of the ignorant.¹⁰

I may add that the conception of an earthly paradise was not peculiar to the Assassins. For example, it also existed amongst the Mogul emperors of the modern pre-British India. We do not forget the famous inscription placed over the gateway to this Mogul garden:

If on earth, there is an Eden of Bliss,
It is this, it is this, none but this.

9. See Silvestre de Sacy, *Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins et sur l'origine de leur nom*, Paris, 1809, pp 11-12, my translation.

10. I assume, of course, that the features enumerated above by Marco Polo can be traced back to the original genius of the order, Hasan-ibn-Sabah himself. This seems to be true of all the original institutions of the Assassins, who were, as we have already seen, in any case, in a very decadent state — in fact, practically at death's door during the reign of Ala-u'd-Din, which Marco Polo describes. It should not, of course, be forgotten that the term 'paradise' means originally a garden. The ancient 'paradise' or pleasure-parks of the King of Persia, the earthly 'King of Kings', formed the original earthly model of its celestial replica, first conceived by Zoroastrian theology in ancient Iran and borrowed from this creed by the Jews and Christians. Readers of Xenophon's *Anabasis* will remember the 'paradise' which the Ten Thousand Greeks met in the course of their famous march.

I conclude, accordingly, that in the famous narrative of Marco Polo we have an account of technique of the Assassins, which is accurate as well as colourful, and which admirably conveys the peculiar brand of sinister romanticism which the Sheikh Al-Jebal and the strange sect that he ruled, conveyed to the world of medieval Christendom.

I conclude my outline of this formidable technique by directing a glance at its terrifying culmination, those murderous sects themselves which have caused this sect of learned theosophists to survive in the memory of posterity primarily in connection with the grim soubriquet to which these acts themselves gave rise: the sinister name of 'Assassins'.

Chapter XVIII: *Causes Célèbres* of the Assassins

The name of the Hashishin soon made men think of the technique of terror, the means which the sect evolved for its defence against a hostile world. In particular, it suggested the homicidal act itself, with which that technique itself culminated. Whilst it is true that not every act of killing which was ascribed to the Assassins was actually their handiwork, yet so many notabilities in the Islamic universe were 'translated' to a better world by means of the daggers of the da'is that ere long the name of the sect had acquired its present significance as the synonym for murder itself.

From that day to this 'the Old Man of the Mountain' has ranked as, so to speak, the 'godfather of assassination', as the patron of the 'murder as one of the fine arts', as prototype of scientific gangsterdom. For the 'arms' of the sect were a 'dagger rampant'.

The actual Assassins, then, of whom history takes cognisance, were the da'is only; the rustic simpletons to whom the esoteric ends of the order remained a book with seven seals, but who – and all the more on account of their very ignorance and simplicity – became the most superb and self-sacrificing tools of which any secret society anywhere has been fortunate enough to dispose.

Knowing no law save the despotic will of their Sheikh, and with no ambition save only that of 'shuffling off this mortal coil', and exchanging it at the first opportunity for the ineffable joys of paradise – already glimpsed in the delirium of hashish – the man-slayers of the Sheikh Al-Jebal devoted themselves to their bloody tasks with one-track mind and a dumb dog-like devotion.

With a single and indivisible purpose which no nicety or doubt was ever permitted to disturb or retard, the da'is constituted a unique corps of professional man-killers. Neither the Caesars nor the Borgias ever had such a *corps d'élite* at their disposal, one absolutely reliable under any and every emergency, and ever faithful under torture and unto death.

The 'self-devoted ones', the 'destroying angels' of the Mountain, were sharply cut off from the higher ranks of the order both by their use of hashish, by their more than military discipline, and by the peculiar dress which distinguished them.

Clothed in white with red caps, girdles and boots, with the dagger emblazoned in red on the white background, the da'is constituted a striking and terrifying sight. But their profession was not inseparable from their professional costume! They were trained to become adepts in all sorts of disguises. Thus we learn that, prior to executing one of their most celebrated murders, that of the famous crusading chief, Conrad of Montferrat, titular King of Jerusalem, several da'is who were 'on the job' disguised themselves as Christian monks so effectively that they lived without detection in the Christian camp for six months, waiting for the apt moment at which to complete their deadly work.

It seems also highly probable that in the fairly numerous cases of daggers (usually poisoned), purses, etc, deposited by the bedside of powerful enemies of the order, that these 'presents' must have been placed there by da'is who had served long in the intimidated ruler's army, and thus had disguised themselves well enough to have learned how to enter and to quit his tent unnoticed. As we have noticed above, this means of psychological terror was potent enough to strike panic

into the heart of even the greatest rulers of the East, such as Sultan Sanjar and the still more redoubtable Saladin himself.

We have not forgotten the taste for the spectacular manifested by the da'is in the actual accomplishment of their numerous acts. On this point Professor Browne adds the information that:

The da'is, though unlearned in the esoteric mysteries of their religion, were carefully trained not only in the use of arms, the endurance of fatigue, and the arts of disguise, but also in some cases at any rate, in foreign and even European languages... It was seldom, of course, that they survived their victims, especially as they were fond of doing their work in the most spectacular style, striking down the Muslim Amir on a Friday in the mosque, and the Christian prince or duke on a Sunday in the church, in sight of the assembled congregation. Yet so honourable a death and so sure a way to future happiness was it deemed by the followers of Hasan-ibn-Sabah to die on one of the 'Old One's' quests, that we read of the mothers of da'is who wept to see their sons return alive.¹

In this last connection, another authority tells us of an episode when:

Three of the devoted attacked the governor of Nishapur and murdered him. They then entered the house of the vizier of the Shah of Khwarizm, but not finding him, they wounded one of his servants in a scuffle, and then sallying into the streets proclaim aloud that they were Assassins, and thus devoted themselves to the vengeance of an infuriated mob, by whom they were all slain.²

It is certain that the murders actually committed by the da'is were quite numerous, though less numerous than the threats which caused so many Eastern princes to 'walk delicately' before the Old Man, and, incidentally, to 'pay through the nose' for the privilege of ending their days in peace!

We have noted above the economic reason for this relative forbearance on the part of the Old Man and his advisers. Enormous sums were sometimes asked by Alamut, and conceded by the objects of its threats, an action that speaks louder than many words of the danger represented by the remarkable prowess of the da'is.

The article cited above goes on to give an instance of a minister who discovered that he had five members of the sect serving at his table, a fact which he only learned from the Assassins themselves! By order of the Shah he reluctantly burnt them alive, but agreed on demand to pay the enormous sum of 50,000 pieces of gold per annum for the rest of his life as expiation for their death. There were, no doubt, many other instances of similar demands for, 'Your money or your life!' The general prosperity in which these masters of nothing but a few rugged valleys seem to have lived, argues that the dagger also can be made an unfailing source of a permanent trade-boom: there seems to have been no unemployment in the valleys of the Assassins!

It is certain that the list of the order's victims was not only long, but was besides highly distinguished. It included, in fact, many of the outstanding men of the

1. 'Secret Societies of the Middle Age', *Chamber's Papers for the People*, 1880, p 9.
2. 'Secret Societies of the Middle Age', *Chamber's Papers for the People*, 1880, p 9.

age.³ It would be somewhat superfluous either to make a complete list of all the victims of the Assassins, or to describe their murders indiscriminately. There are, after all, only a limited number of ways of stabbing a man! I shall, accordingly, limit myself to describing six *causes célèbres* of the followers of the Old Man. In each of these cases the victim was a man of the very highest rank of eminence. These pre-eminent master-coups were the murders respectively of the great Persian Minister and political philosopher, Nizam-al-Mulk; of the Fatimid Khalif, Al Amir; of the Abbassid Khalif, Al-Rashid; of Conrad of Montferrat, titular King of Jerusalem; and the two dangerous, though unsuccessful attempts, which resulted in wounding two of the greatest and most famous kings of the Middle Ages, Saladin, Sultan of the Near East, and Edward the First, King of England. Regarding their other leading victims I shall content myself with a bare allusion.⁴

I may preface my account for the following murders with the remark that they indicate in a manner which is very striking the phenomenal ability and ubiquity of this handful of mountaineers. For these six victims alone represent, respectively, the Khalifs of the two great divisions of Islam, the Abbassids and the Fatimids, the most famous Sultan of the entire Middle Ages (Saladin), one of the greatest of all Muslim statesmen and political writers (the Nizam-al-Mulk), the greatest English king of the entire medieval age and the leader of the Frankish Crusades in the East – a passable bag for a petty sect, the entire domain of which did not equal one English county. And these were but a mere handful as compared with other victims only a degree less eminent than they!

I subjoin these *causes célèbres*, in chronological order:

I: The Nizam-al-Mulk, the great Prime Minister of the (Seljuk) Turkish Sultan, Malik Shah, had incurred the wrath of the Assassins by a book on politics – the *Sijasat-Nama* – in which he accused them of communistic practices which he (correctly) traced back to the fifth-century sect of Mazdak. He also took police measures against the new order, whose growing power filled him with alarm. His murder at the direct order of Hasan-ibn-Sabah was the first important example of ‘direct action’ – to employ a modern nihilist phrase – carried out by the newly founded sect.

The Nizam-al-Mulk was ‘one of the world’s great statesmen’, as Mr Stanley Lane-Poole describes him in his *Life of Saladin* (a probably false tradition already cited makes him out to have been a near associate of Hasan-ibn-Sabah and of Omar Khayyam, *viz*: the legend of the ‘three friends’ prefixed to most editions of the *Rubáiyát*) was struck down when accompanying the court of Malik Shah on the road from Isfahan to Baghdad.⁵ The date of his murder was 14 October 1093 – 10 Ramadan, AH 485. The elderly minister was resting in his tent when he was approached by a man dressed as a Sufi, or wandering preacher and mystic. The Sufi handed him a petition, and while the Nizam was reading it, he was fatally stabbed

3. It is true that the list also includes some dubious cases, where the handiwork of the da’is is not beyond dispute. For, of course, the phenomenal reputation of the sect provoked both imitators and calumniators. ‘All that glitters is not gold’, and not everyone enjoyed the honour of being ‘bumped off’ by a genuine Assassin! Hence a complete death record, a ‘murderer’s log’ of the order would, like a Shakespeare folio, include some apocryphal or doubtful instances. However, the authentic sign-manual, the genuine hallmark of the sect, is usually plain enough to remove any element of doubt.

4. ‘Secret Societies of the Middle Age’, *Chamber’s Papers for the People*, 1880, p 9.

5. Stanley Lane-Poole, *Saladin: Authentic Biographies of the World’s Greatest Characters*, London, 1898.

by the disguised da'is, for such he was, who was promptly killed by the guard. The Nizam-al-Mulk headed the long and illustrious list of the victims of the new and formidable sect.

II: The Khalif of Egypt, the Fatimid, Al-Amir, the tenth ruler of that dynasty (1101-31).

After the death of the eighth Fatimid Khalif, Al-Mustansir, the Assassins, as partisans of the murdered Nizar, ceased, as we will remember, to acknowledge the Fatimid supremacy, and went into opposition to the original Ismaili sect.

In 523 AH (1131) we are told by the great Arabic historian, Ibn Khaldun, that:

On Tuesday, the third of the month, the Khalif proceeded to Fustat and thence to the Island of Rhoda, where he had built a pleasure house for a favourite Bedouin concubine. Some persons who were plotting his death were lying there concealed with their arms ready. As he was going by them, they sprang out and fell upon him with their swords. He had then crossed the bridge, and had no other escort than a few pages, courtiers and attendants. They bore him in a boat across the Nile and brought him still living into Cairo. That night he was taken to the castle and there he died.⁶

Incidentally, this is the only recorded murder of the Assassins accomplished by means of the sword. By 'some people', the historian of course denotes the emissaries of the Old Man.

III: Khalif Al-Rashid: A few years later it was the turn of the Abbassids. His predecessor, Al-Mustarshid, having been 'taken off' by the Assassins in Baghdad, his successor, the Khalif Al-Rashid:

... assembled an army and marched against Alamut, burning to avenge the death of his father (1137). He reached Isfahan; but there his march was terminated and his purpose frustrated by his death. He was murdered in his tent by four Assassins, who had entered his service for the purpose; and when the news of his death reached Alamut, the triumph of the dagger over the sword was proclaimed for seven days and nights by the sound of kettle drums and trumpets from the ramparts of the fortress.⁷

IV: Saladin (1176): We have not forgotten the audacious intrusion of Sinan himself into the tent of this famous warrior, which finally induced him to retreat from before Masyaf. The Assassins had, however, already given Saladin proof of their quality. The Sultan's biographer, Mr Stanley Lane-Poole, tells us that:

6. Reverend De Lacy O'Leary, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifat*, London, 1923, p 457.

7. The dagger seems to have been practically the sole instrument of the Assassins' vengeance, though sometimes it was poisoned. Unlike those Indian Assassins, the Thugs — *vide infra* — they do not seem to have used the rope for strangling. Unlike the Borgias, they did not use poison, apparently, except sometimes to envenom their daggers. Though I have no evidence bearing on the point, I should not suppose that there was any esoteric significance attached to the exclusive use of the dagger by the da'is. Like poison in Renaissance Italy, it was probably simply the most convenient tool to hand, being inconspicuous and handy for a quick blow. The da'is were, as we have noted, quite unconcerned with making a getaway.

On 22 May Saladin was resting in the tent of one of his captains, when a fanatic rushed in upon him and struck at his head with a knife. The dagger slashed his collar, but the rings of the armour kept it out of his neck. All this was the work of an instant, and in another, Baskush had grasped the knife and held it though it sawed his finger, until at last the desperado was killed, with the knife still held in his hand. Another cut-throat followed, and fell dead; and yet a third; but the guard was now on the alert. Saladin mounted and rode to the headquarters in panic fear, scarcely realising that he was yet alive. The sudden assault of the secret Assassins had terrors which he never felt on the battlefield. This attempt by the agents of the Sheikh of the Mountain unnerved him. It was found that the three desperados had contrived to be enrolled in the bodyguard itself.⁸

The sequel to this narrow escape was that Saladin resolved to march on Masyaf and end the nest of vipers for good and all. The fantastic result, the flitting visit of Sinan u'd-Din Rashid himself, Saladin's dramatic midnight awakening and hurried retreat from the country of the 'Old Man of the Mountain', has already been referred to in the course of my chapter on Sinan u'd-Din, the famous Sheikh of the Syrian Assassins.

V: Conrad, King of Jerusalem and Marquis of Monferrat: This powerful baron was recognised by Richard of England and the other Crusading leaders as King of the Latin state of Jerusalem; though the Holy City itself had been occupied by Saladin in 1187, after his decisive victory at Hattin (4 July and 2 October 1187). Conrad's rival, Henry of Champagne, who also claimed the throne of Jerusalem, had courted the Assassins, and had even enjoyed the rare privilege of being the guest of Sinan.⁹ It is, however, uncertain whether he was the instigator of Conrad's murder. The surviving murderer confessed under torture that their deed was in revenge for the robbery of a merchant vessel which carried goods belonging to their Sheikh. The French accused Richard of England, who was then at loggerheads with Conrad, of instigating the murder, but this seems highly improbable.

TA Archer and CL Kingsford tell us that:

Hardly had the Marquis thus attained the object of his ambitions [that is, recognition as King of Jerusalem – FAR], when he was cut off by a mysterious fate. On Monday, 27 April 1192, so runs the story in the Franco-Syrian chronicles, Conrad, weary of waiting for his queen, who had stayed late at the bath, went out to dine with Philip of Beauvais. Finding that the Bishop had already dined, Conrad turned for home. As he came out of the Bishop's house into the narrow road, two men advanced to meet him; one of the two offered him a letter, and whilst Conrad was thus off his guard they stabbed him with their knives.

8. Lane-Poole, *Saladin*.

9. 'Secret Societies of the Middle Age', *Chamber's Papers for the People*, 1880. The expression 'the triumph of the dagger over the sword' itself constitutes a most apt summary of the murderous fears of the Assassins.

Conrad fell dead on the spot; of his murderers, one was instantly slain, and the other was captured soon after.¹⁰

This daring murder in broad daylight of one of the most celebrated chiefs of the Crusaders made a tremendous sensation. As I have already stated, it was afterwards proved that the da'is who accomplished the deed had previously lived for six months in the Crusaders' camp disguised as Christian monks. The murder of Conrad of Montferrat by these 'devoted ones' represented Sinan's swan-song in the homicidal art, as the famous Sheikh died soon after.

VI: Edward the First of England: Edward the First of England, who went on Crusade when his father, Henry the Third, was still alive, after his victory at Evesham over Simon de Montfort (1265), was destined to become one of the greatest soldiers and statesmen of the entire Middle Ages, and is probably the greatest king that England had so far known. He was in the Holy Land from 9 May 1271 to 14 September 1272. By this time the Crusades, along with the Middle Ages in general, were in a very decadent state. Even so able a general as was Edward could accomplish nothing more than the postponement of the agony for a few years. His arrival saved Acre, but, as we have seen, it fell before the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt twenty years later (1291).

The attempt on Edward's life is described by Messrs Archer and Kingsford in these terms:

After his return to Acre, Edward commenced negotiations with a Saracen Emir who professed himself ready to become a Christian. His messenger was admitted time after time to Edward's presence and all suspicion was lulled asleep. At last, on his fifth visit, on 18 June 1272, the Assassin found his opportunity. After a cursory examination for arms he was permitted to pass into the prince's presence. The day was hot and Edward, clad in a tunic only, was resting on a couch; he took the Emir's letter from the messenger, who as he bent in Eastern fashion to answer the prince's questions, drew a knife from his belt and struck a blow at his intended victim. Edward caught the blow on his arm, and tripping the villain to the ground with his foot, wrenched the dagger from his grasp and stabbed him as he lay. The English servants coming found the would-be murderer dead, but to make assurance doubly sure, battered out his brains with a foot-stool. Edward's life was in much danger, for the weapon was poisoned, and though the Master of the Temple gave him what was declared to be a certain antidote, the wound grew daily worse. At last, an English doctor pledged himself to effect a perfect cure. He bade the nobles lead the weeping Eleanor from her husband's presence; then he cut away the poisoned flesh, and thus, under his care, Edward was able within fifteen days to appear on his horse in public.¹¹

10. TA Archer and CL Kingsford, *The Crusades: The Story of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, London, 1894.

11. Archer and Kingsford, *The Crusades*. In this instance alone, it is not quite certain that the attempt was made by an actual Assassin, that is, a member of the Ismaili sect. By the time of Edward's Crusade (1171-72), the Persian Assassins had been wiped out fifteen years previously, and the Syrian Assassins were on their very last legs. In fact, as we will recollect, the order had fallen into such a state of decadence that, by this time, the da'is had descended to

The learned authors add a note to the effect that the romantic story of Eleanor sucking the poison from her husband's wound cannot be traced back beyond the Italian chronicle of Ptolemy of Lucca, fifteen years later. I may add that Edward, though he soon left Palestine to ascend the English throne, never lost the hope of returning to the Holy Land, and at the very end of his life took an oath to do so if he succeeded in his last campaign against Bruce in 1307.¹²

This last attempt virtually closed the formidable list of murders which began with the Nizam-al-Mulk in 1093. The above are representative names, but though perhaps the most illustrious victims – or intended victims – of 'the Old Man of the Mountain', yet they are only a handful in proportion to the full 'bag' accumulated by the 'self-devoted ones', usually at the cost of their own lives, during the 180 years between the murder of the great Persian statesman and the attempted murder of the great English King.

This list of Khalifs, Sultans, Emirs, doctors of the Muslim law, crusading chiefs and even Christian Bishops, included many who, though the march of years has now effaced their footprints from the sands of time, yet ranked in their day and generation with the most illustrious names of East and West.

As probably none save Edward and Saladin are known by name to a modern educated European reader, it would be superfluous to enumerate them. But, to give some faint conception of the vast range and unbroken persistency of the operations of the Assassins, I will simply remark that Professor EG Browne, in a list of victims which does not make any pretensions at being exhaustive, enumerates eighteen men of either royal rank or great distinction in Persia and Iraq alone, and these, with their numerous confreres formed, as we will not have forgotten, yet a mere handful against the innumerable victims of intimidation and blackmail by means of the financial contributions of whom the Assassins made their daggers pay their way and even yield handsome dividends.

It was, however, the actual act of murder itself which made this strange blend of finance and fanaticism into the paying process that it was. It has been aptly said that what in the East promises to be effective, must always be backed up by prompt performance. It was because they realised this and consistently acted upon it, that the da'is of the Assassins became a name of unprecedented terror in East and West alike.

Never, as far as historical record goes, has such a mere handful of men as were the subjects of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' been able to terrorise so effectually well-nigh the whole contemporary civilised world by so subtle a technique as was that originated by Hasan-ibn-Sabah: a technique which moved with the smooth inevitability of a Greek tragedy towards the deadly stroke of his white-robed 'destroying angels' – those fearless, incorruptible 'devoted ones' who raised, as it were, to their visible Sheikh and to their invisible Imam, their more than Roman farewell of sombre fanaticism, 'Hail, Caesar, those about to die, salute thee!'

selling their 'professional services' to orthodox Muslim princes; a state of things absolutely inconceivable during their palmy days. As, however, the attempted murderer of Edward went to work in the genuine style of the Mountain, he was probably a *bona fide* da'is hired for the express purpose by the Saracen Emir of Syria who hatched the plot to get rid of Edward. Even if not, the case may be included, since 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery'.

12. He died at Burgh-by-Sands, near Carlisle, in that year, when on the march to Scotland.

Chapter XIX: The Defence of Terrorism

As historians hitherto commonly refer to the Assassins in the terms of a prosecuting counsel, not infrequently in phrases so violent as would disbar a prosecuting counsel in any civilised court of justice, I propose, in the interests of equity, to conduct for the Assassins a 'defence of terrorism'.

Broadly speaking, assassination can be classified under one (or more) of three headings, *viz*: as murder in self-defence, murder as revenge for some positive injury, and murder for murder's sake, that is, murder out of 'sheer cussedness'.

Of the three species of murder, the last is universally condemned by all moralists of all schools of ethics. The ironic defence of murder conducted by Thomas de Quincey in his brilliant essay in irony, *Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, is a masterpiece of literature, but scarcely of moral philosophy. No one else besides the great writer's imaginary 'connoisseur' is likely to be taken in by this plausible apologetic, compounded as it is of the most exquisite subtlety.

Our second sub-division, murder as revenge of some real and positive injury, is likewise universally condemned by all moralists – except, perhaps, by some surviving 'fundamentalists', survivals of the Mosaic era of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. In connection with this second class of murder, however, we should note that the motive for condemnation is no longer absolute, but assumes the pre-existence of social assumptions. For example, assuming the existence of a real injury as motive for the homicide, it would not necessarily be wrong in itself to administer severe punishment, including even perhaps death by way of preventing recurrence of such injuries, and their repetition in other similar cases. The criminal jurisprudence of all civilised nations is based on this last assumption, though the suitability of the death penalty even for murder – capital punishment – has been and still is hotly disputed.

In the case, however, of private individuals killing in revenge, even when the law unjustly denies them legal redress in the criminal courts, all modern moralists unite in condemning such revenge, on the fundamental ground that, however serious the provocation, private vengeance merely prolongs the chain of violence and is anti-social in its ultimate effects. Hence the individual should sacrifice even a (more or less) justifiable revenge in the general interest of social security, of 'the greatest good of the greatest number'.

In the first case alone, that of murder in self-preservation, is there a genuine division of opinion. Today, probably a majority of opinion among students of ethics could be secured for the proposition that in a genuine case of self-defence the axiom, 'killing no murder', can be held to be applicable. At any rate, modern jurisprudence and the laws of war concur in recognising this standpoint. Even so, there remains a vast field for adjustment and further dispute on the vexed question as to what constitutes self-defence.¹

1. As we are discussing a question not of law but of ethics, it is only fair to state that several great moralists dissent vehemently from the majority on this point. Buddha in antiquity, and Tolstoy and Gandhi in modern times, represent the greatest moral thinkers of what I may term the minority school of thought. On a literal interpretation, the founder of Christianity and the New Testament could be quoted in support of the same point of view. But most moral theologians claim that the stark gospel injunction, 'thou shalt not kill', was 'a counsel of perfection', and was not intended to be interpreted literally.

To decide the question as to whether the Assassins had any moral justification for their deeds or whether they were murderers pure and simple in the ordinary sense of the word, it is necessary first of all to attempt to decide in which of the three categories mentioned above their technique of terror and the death-stroke is to be classified. Only so can we hope to reach a conclusion as to whether or not any reasonable 'defence of terrorism' can be advanced, and also whether any ethical mitigation can be urged on behalf of the Assassins and of their long list of ruthless deeds of terror and murder.

It will by this time be fairly clear what was the actual position occupied by the Assassins *vis-à-vis* the several aspects, at any rate of their activity, the last of a long series of heretical sects which had for many centuries prior to their time challenged orthodoxy in both Church and State.

Indeed, I have enumerated a whole series of such movements (such as those of Mani, Mazdak, Babak, 'the veiled prophet', etc), all of whom shared at least the fundamental position of the Assassins, in that they were all in revolt against constituted authority in both the religious and secular spheres, and professed social and theological doctrines unspeakably repellent in the eyes alike of governments and of majority opinion in their contemporary world.

In view of this basic identity of their role in relation to the world around them, we are in a position to form a valid opinion from the actual fate of their heretical predecessors, as to the probable fate of the Assassins themselves had it not been for the protection so long afforded them by their technique of terror. The old Latin tag, '*non in verbis sed in actis*' – that is, 'not in words but deeds' – can here be accurately applied.

There is no ambiguity at all about this enquiry. We recollect that grim and bloody story of the great heresiarchs of the Near East in both Zoroastrian and Muslim times. We recall Mani (272) flayed alive, Mazdak (circa 530) buried alive, al Mokanna (the 'veiled prophet', 779) driven to self-immolation in the flames to escape torture and death, Babak (837) crucified and his followers exterminated, and the Zendians exterminated. Such are only the leading examples in the long list of murderous persecutions unleashed by the states and state-churches of Zoroaster and Islam against the heretical predecessors and historic exemplars of the Assassins. Moreover, to enhance the grim story, it seems to be certain that most – originally probably all – of these sects were harmless and inoffensive people, vegetarians and probably pacifists, who only took up arms reluctantly and under the direst persecution, all of which, however, did not save them from the most fiendish tortures and from the most atrocious deaths at the hand of their orthodox persecutors.²

I may add to the above that in modern, no less than in medieval times, the life of the heretical successors of the Assassins has been 'nasty, brutish, desolate and short', to adapt the famous aphorism of Thomas Hobbes.³ One can, however, say that in their case also, as in that of their medieval predecessors, the death of the

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2. In point of fact, even under torture and death, not all these sects resorted to arms. The followers of Mazdak and the Zendians, in particular, seem to have been absolute pacifists, akin to the modern Doukhobors and Quakers, yet this made no difference at all to the merciless ferocity with which they were exterminated. For that matter neither the medieval Inquisition nor the modern Gestapo has ever shown any greater discrimination. In a theocracy always, 'He that is not with us is against us.'
 3. See *Leviathan* (1651).

heretic in Muslim lands has usually been long. Like Charles II of England (1685), they were an 'unconscionable time in dying'. The fiendish cruelties inflicted upon the mild and inoffensive Baha'is in nineteenth century Persia have already been the subject of comment. In our own day, members of the liberal Ahmeyda sect have suffered death by stoning, according to the canon law of Islam.⁴

There is, then, no reasonable room for doubt that only the Assassins' technique of terror stood between them and a similar or identical fate. Indeed, it seems fairly clear that the original Ismaili 'sect of seven' had been of the same mild and inoffensive character as the majority of the other heretical sects here enumerated. It is highly probable that when Abdullah-ibn-Maymun reorganised it on the lines of an 'open conspiracy' against the Abbassid empire, he did so solely to prevent its extermination by the ferocity of its Abbassid persecutors. Up to his time the Ismailis seem to have been a purely pacifist sect. At any rate, it is quite certain that it was only when they did resort to force that the Fatimids were able to cut any figure at all in the world. Otherwise, in a world wherein only one choice existed, to be hammer or anvil, the Ismailis themselves would probably have gone the way of the other heresies which I have named.

It was not otherwise with the Assassins. They, too, were the objects of a deadly hatred, and while no doubt augmented by their own ruthless use of terror, it existed anterior to it and for other reasons besides the 'arguments weighty and trenchant' which the Assassins used in their own defence. The fact that 'this animal is wicked, it defends itself when attacked', while it augmented the hatred of the orthodox against the sect which had the effrontery to strike back, was not in itself the cause of that fanatical hatred or of the savage persecutions which the Assassins suffered equally with their heretical predecessors.⁵

No less than the Hazdakites before them and the Baha'is of a later day, the Assassins were the objects of a most ferocious repression wherever circumstances put them at the mercy of the established powers. For example, in 1113, when their ally and protector, Ridwan, Emir of Aleppo, died, 'his successor became their merciless enemy. More than 300 of them, of both sexes and all ages, were cruelly massacred, and 200 were thrown into prison. Abu-al-Fettah, the nephew of Hasan-ibn-Sabah, was tortured to death, his body cut in pieces and then burnt, and his head sent through Syria.' The same authority adds: 'The still numerous Assassins retaliated fearfully; against such enemies, armies and executions were no security, and the dread of assassination sank deep into the hearts of all the princes of the East.' It seems tolerably clear that, without this 'fear of assassination', the rest of the sect would have had a short life and the reverse of a merry end!⁶

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4. The unbelievable ferocity with which the Baha'is were harried to death is attested in detail by such unimpeachable authorities as Professor EG Browne and M de Gobineau — see Edward Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Volume 4, London, 1902, and De Gobineau, *Religion et philosophie dans l'Asie Centrale*, Paris, 1865. Flaying alive, roasting over a slow fire, etc, etc, were freely employed. There is no need fortunately to go into the horrible details, but the curious reader can find them in the aforementioned books.
 5. We have not forgotten that the leaders of the world of Islam fully comprehended the spiritual relationship between the Assassins and the earlier communistic sects of Mazdak and other 'enemies of society', as they were regarded from the standpoint of orthodox believers in religion and private property. We recollect that the Nizam-ul-Mulk had expressly traced this connection — a piece of spiritual and social genealogy which cost him his life.
 6. Thomas Keightley, *Secret Societies of the Middle Ages*, London, 1848, p 5. That the fear of extermination by Muslim orthodoxy, against which the Assassins sought to protect themselves,

This massacre was far from being an isolated event. Professor Browne describes others in these terms. There were, no doubt, many more:

Of course, there were savage reprisals on the part of the orthodox: thus we read of a persecution of 'heretics and free-thinkers' at Nishapur in 1096; of a massacre of Batinis [that is, Assassins – FAR] ordered by [Sultan] Barkiyarug in June 1101, of the crucifixion of Sa'd-ul-Mulk the Wazir, with four Batinis, and of the notorious Ibn-Attash and some of his followers in 1106–07; of a massacre of 700 Batinis at Amid in 1124; of a yet greater slaughter of them by Sanjar in 1127 to avenge the death of the Minister Mu'in-ul-Mulk (Sanjar later found a dagger in the earth beside his bed when en route for Alamut; he took the hint and retreated!), and of Abbas of Rayy, one of their most relentless foes, killed in 1146–47, who used to build pyramids of their skulls.⁷

Ibn Attash, one of Hasan-ibn-Sabah's chief converts, was, we learn from the same authority, executed in the following ingenious way:

He was paraded on a camel through the streets of Isfahan, a spectacle for thousands, pelted with mud and dirt, and mocked in derisive verses; afterwards he was crucified, and hung on the cross for seven days. Arrows were fired at him as he hung there, helpless and tormented, and finally his body was burned to ashes.⁸

Such was the sort of fate which the Assassins would only avert by terrorism. Indeed, my expression is too strong. Even with all their efforts, they could only postpone, but not avert it. Eventually the Mongols avenged with their usual thoroughness the wrongs which the commonwealth of Islam had endured at the heretics' hands. It was an oriental version of *aut Caesar aut nihil* – 'the dagger or nothing'.

It is not open to any reasonable doubt that, in the concrete circumstances of their time, nature's first law, survival, was for the Assassins a virtual equivalent to

was not an idle one, is sufficiently demonstrated by the fate of their heretical and communistic predecessors enumerated in the preceding chapter, while indeed the final fate of the Assassins themselves demonstrates it with ample emphasis. Over and above these examples we can adduce the modern example of the Baha'is to 'point a moral'.

This interesting movement, which today has altogether broken with Islam and claims the status of an independent religion, with followers on both sides of the Atlantic, originally arose as a Muslim heresy founded by a Persian heresiarch, who claimed to be the 'Bab' or 'gate' of the truth, and as such, claimed to supersede Mohammed. His movement was, in fact, not unlike the Ismaili movement in its early pacific stage before being reorganised by Abdullah-ibn-Maymun on conspiratorial and anti-governmental lines. For example, the Baha'is profess similarly a mystical theology closely related to an esoteric numerology, in which nine appears as the key number.

Despite their harmless character, the Baha'is suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of the Muslim orthodoxy – the Bab himself was murdered in 1830 – which are attested by competent European eye-witnesses. I may add that the Assassins themselves endured all these horrors when and where they fell into the hands of their orthodox persecutors. With the example of the heresiarch, Mazdak, before him, who was buried alive, we can hardly blame Hasan-ibn-Sabah for preferring the dagger to the spade! See de Gobineau, *La Religion et la philosophie dans l'Asie Centrale*, and Browne, *History of Persian Literature*, Volume 4.

7. Edward Browne, *History of Persian Literature*, Volume 2, London, 1902, p 312.

8. Browne, *History of Persian Literature*, Volume 2, p 316.

their technique of terror, including its grim finale, the dagger thrusts of their 'destroying angels'. In raising on their behalf 'a defence of terrorism', one is fully justified in reducing the question to this simple query: where the contending forces are hopelessly unequal, as here, is assassination a legitimate weapon? In the Irish Civil War of 1920-22 we have seen the same query put in our own day. Ambuscade is acknowledged by all authorities as a legitimate *ruse-de-guerre*. Where, if anywhere, is the dividing line between ambush and plain murder?

Chapter XX: The Assassins, the Templars, Jesuits, Etc

Save for some scanty remnants and offshoots still surviving in the Lebanon, Persia and India, the Assassins perished in the thirteenth century. Between 1256 and 1293 the Mongols and the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt respectively destroyed their power in East and West. Since that era, the sect of the Assassins has been merely a name, a name of terror it is true, but still only a name. 'The Old Man of the Mountain' and his man-killers thenceforward took their place in the schedule of 'old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago'. The long conflict between the orthodox Abbassids and the heretical Ismailis ended in their common ruin at the hands of the terrible Mongols, to whom the niceties of doctrine meant nothing at all, and for whom culture existed only as something to be utterly and irrevocably destroyed.

Whilst, however, the Assassins themselves perished, the memory of the terrible sect presided over by the Sheikh of the Mountain lingered long in the minds of men – moreover, as 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' – it is evident that the unique pre-eminence of the Assassins as a terrorist movement provoked numerous admirers, and its example left its imprint on the movements of succeeding ages. Not only was this so, but even in the case of modern movements similarly conditioned by the circumstances of their own day, we find remarkable similarities in outlook and organisation to those current among the Assassins, a proof that the great psychologist who devised their technique of terror had fully grasped the permanent fundamentals of the allied arts of conspiracy and terrorism.

In this chapter I propose to glance at the subsequent movements directly influenced by the Assassins, in particular at the Templars and the Jesuits. Then, only more briefly, I shall direct a cursory investigation at some modern movements which reveal certain points of similarity with the medieval oriental sect, especially the Mormons and the Nihilists. Thereafter, I can summarise my conclusions before terminating this inquiry.

Three movements of a later day than that of the Assassins can be demonstrated to have shown certain traces of their influence, *viz*: the Templars, the Jesuits and the Indian Thugs (or, more properly, Thags). I subjoin these in descending order of probability. Hence I begin with the Templars, the only one of three which had direct relations with the Assassins, and therefore borrowed directly from them.

A: The Templars: After the capture of Jerusalem by the first Crusade in 1099 (15 July) the defence of the newly acquired Holy Land became the chief preoccupation of Christendom. The Papacy in particular, both as the direct instigator of the Crusades and as the head of the all-powerful Catholic Church, was especially preoccupied with the question. Nor was the problem an easy one to solve successfully. The crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem was far away; a detached outpost of Christendom 'dumped' in the midst of the Muslim world, with the powerful Fatimid Sultans of Egypt on one side, and the still more powerful Seljuk Turks on the other. Transport difficulties hampered communications at every turn, and the possession of the Holy City could only be guaranteed by a continual stream of Crusaders. The Church was then at the apogee of its influence over medieval Europe, and its appeals for the rescue of the Holy Land did not fall on deaf ears. Between 1099 and 1291 there were five main Crusades, supplemented by countless

minor expeditions. Yet, despite all these, Jerusalem fell before Saladin and by the end of the thirteenth century the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was extinct.

The Crusades, however only took place at intervals. And in the meantime, the problem of defence remained urgent, particularly as the Muslim world began to recover from the first impact of the Crusaders and, in its turn, launched its counter-attacks. To meet this growing danger, the Church resorted to a variety of devices.

The most important and permanent of these devices was the creation of special orders of knights devoted exclusively to the defence of Jerusalem, and living for this purpose under a code, or 'rule', half-monastic and half military in character. Several of these special orders achieved a high degree of celebrity: in particular, the knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem became at a later date the defenders of the outposts of Europe, Rhodes and Malta, against the '*drang nach Westen*', 'the drive to the West', of the Ottoman Turks. Alone of the medieval knightly orders, this order still exists, though since Napoleon seized Malta in 1798, it has possessed no territorial centre. Its present grand-master is the seventy-sixth in succession from the founder. The famous order later known as the Teutonic Knights also arose at this time, though its greatest fame was gained after it transferred its activities from Palestine to Northern Europe, where, in what was, perhaps, the most permanently important of the Crusades, it conquered and forcibly converted the still pagan Prussians and Lithuanians (thirteenth and fourteenth century).¹

The greatest and most famous of all these orders, however, was that of the Templars, or Knights of the Temple, who, throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were not only the most famous order of the age, but who became in the latter part of that era the possessors of such vast wealth, lands and political and ecclesiastical influence as to cause them to be ranked, throughout the two centuries for which they existed, 1119-1314, as one of the great powers of their contemporary world. It is said to have possessed 7000 manors in Christendom, plus 18 fortresses in Palestine itself.

Here I am not concerned with the general history of this famous medieval order, nor does the dramatic story of its overbearing arrogance and the grim catastrophe of its sudden fall enter my purview except insofar as it was influenced and expedited by the close relations which existed between the famous pseudo-Mohammedan order and the equally famous Christian one. These relations gave rise to the charge, or so its enemies at least alleged and the Papacy eventually endorsed, that it also was only pseudo-Christian. I am here treating the Templars solely in this limited connection.

The knightly Order of the Temple was founded in 1119 and received its formal charter in 1128 at the Church Council of Troyes, under the powerful auspices of the famous Abbot, St Bernard. It played a leading role in the defence of the Crusading states in Palestine right down to the fall of the last Christian fortress of Acre in 1291. Long before this last date the fame and possessions of the order had spread far beyond the Holy Land and had become virtually synonymous with Christendom itself. But down to the end of the era of the Crusades, Palestine remained its headquarters. As we shall see, the Templars did not long survive the passing of the crusading era, the exigencies of which had originally called them into being. They derived their name from their original headquarters near the site of Solomon's Temple.

1. Since Napoleon captured Malta in 1798, the headquarters of the still active Knights of St John has been in Rome, under the eye of the Vatican itself.

From a very early period in their evolution, the Templars were in direct relations with their Ismaili neighbours. In 1148 the Templars invaded the country of the Sheikh, in revenge for the murder of the Christian Count of Tripoli, and compelled the mountaineers to pay tribute. In 1171 Sinan, finding himself ringed round by the fortresses of the powerful order, offered to turn Christian in return for a remittance of the tribute. This 'Jesuitical' trick naturally did not deceive the knights, who, however, feared the loss of their tribute as their overlord, King Amalric of Jerusalem, showed a disposition to accept Sinan's offer and to remit the tribute. Whereupon, the Templars at the instigation of one Walter de Mesnil, 'an evil man with one eye', intercepted and slew the envoys of the Assassins on the borders of the country of Tripoli. Notwithstanding this crime, the two neighbouring orders seem to have preserved some sort of relationship right down to the fall of the Christian power in the East, which event coincided almost exactly with the downfall of the Syrian Assassins themselves!²

Whilst the subject is to a certain extent veiled in mystery, since, after all, two esoteric sects of rival faiths were not likely to proclaim their mutual indebtedness from the housetops, yet there seems to have been a considerable interchange of ideas and details of organisation between the Assassins and the Templars. It is in line with probability that in this exchange the Assassins gave more than they received, since they were, after all, the older order, and, moreover, a long tradition of secret organisation lay behind them since the far-off days of Abdullah-ibn-Maymun and even earlier. The rude West, on the contrary, just then emerging from barbarism as a result of its newly established contact with the still far higher civilisation of the East, had no such wealth of conspiratorial tradition to draw on.

In any case, as all the records have, of course, perished, we know nothing of any influence that the Templars may have exercised on the Assassins, though we do know of one military trait at least which may have been derived from that source. The contemporary chronicler, De Joinville, tells us that the guards of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' were armed with battle-axes, a Western and not an oriental weapon, and one which seems to have been introduced into the East by the Crusaders.

Rather more is known of the converse influence exercised by the Assassins upon the Templars, though even here there is a strong element of mere conjecture. The chief points in this relationship are concisely summarised as follows by a modern author, though I may add that I think he overstates his case and tends to exaggerate what was, nonetheless, a real connection:

Though there may have been no actual connection between the Templars and the Assassins, a considerable similarity may be traced in their dress, their organisation, their secret doctrines and their ulterior designs. As the two societies rose almost side by side, and in the same country, and as that of the Assassins was established first, Von Hammer-Purgstall infers from their resemblance that the Templars were an offshoot of the Ismailis; but the resemblance may be easily admitted and accounted for, apart from this very doubtful derivation, admitting that the ultimate object of both orders was the same — namely, the acquisition of independent power — the erection of a state within a state — so it was natural that the

2. The above crime — the assassination of the Assassins — probably did not much shock its contemporary world. It was, of course, an accepted axiom of medieval ethics that 'no faith need be kept with infidels'.

Templars should adopt an organisation much resembling that of the Assassins. There is indeed between the two orders little more than the difference between Christianity and Islam. The two religious systems gave their peculiar colouring to the orders that sprang from them. The members of both wore white garments; the da'is wearing a red girdle, the Templars a red cross. The resemblance in the internal organisation of the two societies is even more striking. If we omit the da'is class added to the older order by Hasan-ibn-Sabah – the da'is and the rafiq (the primary and secondary classes of the Ismailites), and the lasiq or aspirants may be regarded as the originals of the knights, the chaplains and the serving brethren, while the Sheikh and the Dai-i-Kabir or governors, accord with the master and priors. As to the secret doctrines of the two orders, those of the Assassins have already been spoken of; and the warmest defenders of the Templars have admitted that many of them held opinions savouring of deism and pantheism, while we know that they manifested the most ineffable contempt for the doctrines and observances of the Church.³

The Templars did not long survive the end of the Crusading era and the fall of the Christian power in the East. Indeed, already before this last event, the vast wealth and power of the Templars had provoked the anger and vehement suspicion of the authorities in both Church and State. In 1208 Pope Innocent III passed a public censure upon them, declaring that 'they despised the doctrines of Christ and followed those of demons', along with other hardly less serious charges.

In 1228 the Templars did everything in their power to frustrate the Crusade of the Emperor Frederick Hohenstaufen the Second – the 'wonder of the world' – even going so far as to warn the Sultan of Egypt of his intended attack. On his return, Frederick confiscated their possessions in his dominions and publicly stated that:

We know on good authority that Sultans and their trains are received with pompous alacrity within the gates of the Temple, and that the Templars suffer them to celebrate secular plays, and to perform their superstitious rites with invocations to Mohammed.

In view of the admitted fact that Frederick had an Arabic bodyguard which he used to employ in his frequent wars with the popes, and also of the free-thinking sympathies which this medieval 'anti-Christ' pretty certainly held, it is difficult to take these accusations very seriously!⁴

In 1291 Acre fell, and with it the last Christian stronghold in Palestine. In 1300 the Templars made a last unsuccessful attempt to recover Tortosa. With its failure,

3. 'Secret Societies of the Middle Age', *Chamber's Papers for the People*, 1880, p 12. The last sentence is certainly an exaggeration. All modern authorities doubt, and many deny altogether, the charges of free thought and blasphemy of which the Templars were accused at the time of their downfall.

4. This famous potentate, surnamed 'anti-Christ' by the Papacy, is said to have conducted diplomatic relations with the Syrian Assassins. His enemies even accused him of habitually employing members of the sect for 'professional purposes', that is, to 'bump off' persons obnoxious to him: Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second: Wonder of the World 1194-1250*, New York, 1927.

the Crusades ended. The Templars did not long survive their original *raison d'être*, the defence of the Holy Land. Between 1307 and 1314 the order was abolished by the Papacy, its vast possessions were confiscated and divided among the European states, its grand-master and leading members were forced by the most atrocious tortures to sign 'confessions' of the most damning guilt and, if and when they retracted them, were burned at the stake.

The details of the suppression of the Templars – one of the most sensational events in all medieval history – lie outside my field, as does also the unexampled legal chicanery and judicial murder with which the extirpation of the order was effected. But the actual charges made against the knights are of direct interest in connection with the question of their relationship with the Assassins.

These charges our authority summarises in these terms:

In the act of accusation, drawn up in the name of Pope, the Templars were charged with denying and reviling the doctrines of Christianity, with spitting and trampling upon the cross, with worshipping a cat and a three-faced idol, and with general licentiousness and immorality.⁵

Whilst the question of their guilt cannot, even yet, be regarded as entirely closed, the weight of evidence is in favour of the Templars. We are not concerned with that question here, but we can note the similarity of the charges of systematic immorality and pantheism which were brought by the world of Muslim orthodoxy against the Assassins and by the Christian world against the Templars. That the knights as a body borrowed some of their doctrines from the Ismailis does not on the whole seem very likely. (We need not attach much importance to 'confessions', whether of cat-worshipping Templars or of broomstick-flying witches, both extorted by torture: the rack and thumbscrews had a compelling logic of their own!) It is not at all impossible, however, that individual knights may have succumbed to such ideas. 'All is permissible' has its attractions as a hedonistic doctrine, whilst pantheism has, in all ages, its appeal, to an advanced type of mentality. That the organisation of the Templars borrowed, and probably borrowed heavily, from that of the Syrian Assassins, seems to be indisputable.

Broadly speaking, however, the Templars perished not on account of their heresies, nor even of their wealth, but because of their attempt to constitute 'a state within the state', or rather, church, an abomination in the eyes of the totalitarian Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, just as the constitution of any such state had been previously to the totalitarian Roman Empire which preceded and formed the model of that church. The Assassins had acted more wisely in cutting themselves off altogether from the Muslim world by their screen of mountains and daggers. The Templars remained attached to the Catholic Church and world, which tolerated them only as long as the powerful order was necessary to defend the Holy Land. When the Crusades were over, the Templars ceased to be necessary. Then their very wealth and power proved their undoing. In modern times, their Jesuit successors narrowly escaped an identical fate.

B: The Jesuits: It is a matter of common knowledge that the Jesuits have played a role in the history of modern Catholicism even more spectacular and decisive than that which was played by the Templars in the medieval church. It is also a fact that they, too, narrowly escaped the same fate as the knights when once their historic

5. Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second*, p 18.

task of combatting the Protestant Reformation was over and done with. We will remember that in 1713, Pope Clement XIII declared the order 'to be abrogated, extinguished and abolished for ever'. The Jesuits, however, were more fortunate in their era than were the Templars. The outbreak of the French Revolution – 1789 – once again made the powerful order indispensable, and induced the Papacy to tolerate its role as 'a state within the state'.⁶ The Papal Bull of Restoration – 15 August 1814 – specially referred to the need for recalling 'these tried and trusty mariners' to the aid of 'the storm-tossed Barque of Peter beset by winds and waves' – that is the anti-clerical storm unleashed by the French Revolution.

In the case of the Jesuits, unlike that of the Templars, no direct connection can be established between them and the Assassins. In the entire history of secret societies, Ignatius Loyola and Hasan-ibn-Sabah probably represent the two greatest names. The personal resemblance between these two great conservative masters of counter-revolution is, indeed, extraordinary, and no less is the phenomenal resemblance between their two famous orders. So great in fact is this far-reaching resemblance that I have elsewhere styled the Jesuits as 'the Assassins of Christendom'. As we shall see presently, the term 'Assassins' is not to be understood in a merely figurative sense!

Nonetheless, despite their numerous resemblances, no direct relationship can be established between the two famous societies. The Assassins had long since vanished from the historic scene – 1256–73 – before the Jesuits entered it – 1534–40. It is, in fact, actually doubtful whether the founders of the great Catholic order had ever heard directly of its formidable neo-Muslim predecessor and prototype, which had long since passed into oblivion amid a howl of execration from the entire Muslim world.

Nonetheless, the resemblances between the two orders are striking, more so even than in the case of the Templars. I should add that in the ensuing pages I assume the general correctness of the remarkable hypothesis first advanced by the French orientalist, Hermann Müller, in his outstanding book on Jesuit origins, that the novel and distinctive features of the 'Spanish Company' which differentiate it so sharply from the earlier medieval Christian orders, are derived from Islam via the agency of the Dervish orders, long domiciled in Moorish Spain, where they still existed in the time of Ignatius Loyola.⁷

On the similarity of the Jesuit organisation to that of the Assassins, Müller tells us:

We must realise what sort of an army it was that Ignatius conceived; an army in which no one, officer or private, possessed any rank, any right, any fixity of tenure of position; in which everything depended on the pleasure of the chief; in which 'the obedience of execution is declared to be an imperfect obedience; in which everyone is bound to embrace all the opinions of the leader with an ardour so blind as to leave no place for reflection', with the same ardour of belief 'as one displays towards the articles of the faith'; 'an army whose every member undertakes to sacrifice

6. FA Ridley, *The Jesuits: A Study in Counter-Revolution*, London, 1938.

7. See Hermann Müller, *Les Origines de la Compagnie de Jésus: Ignace, Lainez*, Paris, 1898; and my *The Jesuits* cited above. The reader must not forget that the Moors ruled in Spain from its conquest in 711–12 to the fall of Granada in 1492, the year after Loyola's birth. When the Jesuit Order started, the Muslim faith was still professed in Spain by a large Moorish population.

his reputation, his honour, his liberty, his conscience, where the soldiers and officers mutually denounce and spy upon one another'. *If such an army is not the army of the Old Man of the Mountain, it has at least so many points of resemblance with it as to astonish people who can think clearly, and still more those who approach the problem with special knowledge.*⁸

Müller goes on to demonstrate the remarkable identity in detail between the organisation of the Jesuits and that of the orthodox Muslim Dervishes long domiciled in Moorish Spain. Further, that the famous motto of the company, '*ad majoram Dei gloriam*', and also the most celebrated expressions in the classical writings of Loyola, viz: '*perinde ac cadaver*' – 'like a corpse, like a stick in the hand of the old man', etc – were translations, or near translations, from the literature of the (orthodox) Muslim Dervish orders.

The debt of the Jesuits was, in this instance, a second-hand one, for the Dervish orders which Müller cites as the originals of the great 'Christian' one, were of an orthodox kind. Nonetheless, it is not unlikely that the Muslim orders, themselves based on similar autocratic principles, however much they have loathed the 'Malahida' – 'arch-heretics', viz: the Assassins – yet also borrowed from this superbly organised *corps d'élite*. Even such a pious Christian as Dante did not hesitate, as we know, to borrow from the Arabs.⁹

It is accordingly probable that the Jesuits borrowed, though at second hand, and still retain in the twentieth century, traces of the medieval terrorist sect of 'the Old Man of the Mountain'.

Moreover, the Company of Jesus did not only borrow from the Assassins: they also were themselves 'Assassins'. Faced with a religious revolution in the sixteenth century, the era of the Reformation, and surrounded by a disintegrating feudal civilisation, just then going to pieces under the impact of the newly discovered world market, the Jesuit champions of medievalism and religious conservatism faced a problem very similar to that which had confronted the Assassins in respect of their surrounding world. They also sought to solve it by a similar combination of autocratic centralisation, ruthless terror and the practice of an advanced culture by the superior ranks of the order. As I have written elsewhere in this connection:

Thus the Assassins were the 'old guard' of the classical culture of Islam against the incoming flood of Turkish barbarism, just as the Jesuits later represented, from many points of view, the classical Catholic culture of the Middle Ages, now on the defensive against the northern barbarism represented by the reformers. Both orders, the Mohammedan and the Christian, represented a final stand against the hostility of their contemporary worlds, against which they utilised every physical and ideological weapon – 'arguments weighty and trenchant', as the Assassins described with grim humour the gold and the dagger with which they bribed or intimidated the enemies of their order. The monarchs and theologians of the Reformation were also to know these Jesuit arguments. 'The animal is wicked, it defends itself when attacked.' The phrase sums up the reaction of both the great medieval cultures of

8. Müller, *Les Origines de la Compagnie de Jésus*, p 63, my emphasis.

9. See Miguel Asin-y-Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, New York, 1926. Asin-y-Palacios was himself a Jesuit.

Islam and Catholicism to the advancing tides of Turkish conquest and religious revolution respectively.¹⁰

‘Like causes breed like results.’ The general similarity of their historical position undoubtedly goes far to explain the virtually identical technique employed by these two counter-revolutionary forces. Still, some second-hand borrowing, via the agency of the Dervishes, is not excluded.¹¹

At any rate, whether due to coincidence or to direct imitation, the Jesuits resorted to terrorist methods of an exactly similar character to those employed by their oriental precursors. Like the medieval terrorists the Jesuits used poison and the dagger freely. The ignorant fanatics, Balthasar-Gerard, Jacques Clement, Ravailac, Guy Fawkes, etc, who killed in a mood of exalted fanaticism, and suffered torture and death with stoical resignation, were the Christian counterparts of the da’is of the Assassins.

Moreover, whilst the man-slayers of the order were drawn from the same class of ignorant enthusiasts as were recruited for ‘manual labour’ by the Sheikhs of the Mountain, yet the higher ranks of the ‘company’, like their counterparts among the Assassins, were humanists and scholars, who indeed, did so much for secular education as to make them the cultural leaders of Europe for centuries, an achievement which won for them the enthusiastic praise of such eminent Protestant thinkers and educationalists as Francis Bacon and Comenius. Indeed, a modern German historian has actually defined Jesuitism as ‘humanism pressed into the service of the Church’ (Karl Kautsky).¹² We have not forgotten the very similar opinions expressed by Dr Lacy O’Leary with regard to the Assassins, this peculiar combination of advanced culture, Machiavellian *realpolitik* and ruthless terrorism was indeed common to these two ‘old guards’ of the classical medieval civilisations of the Muslim East and the Christian West.

I subjoin a list of the chief *causes célèbres* of the Jesuits, the ‘bumping off’ of heretical or lukewarm princes by the ‘destroying angels’ of the Catholic ‘Assassins’. (I place the name of the murderer or would-be murderer in brackets.)

- ★ William the Silent of Orange, Stadtholder of the (Protestant) Netherlands, 1584 (Balthasar Gerard).
- ★ Henry III of France, 1589 (Jacques Clement).
- ★ Henry IV of France, 1610 (Ravailac).
- ★ Several unsuccessful conspiracies against Elizabeth of England, culminating in that of Anthony Babington, 1587.
- ★ ‘The Gunpowder Plot’ of 5 November, to blow up James I, the Lords and Commons, 1605 (Guy Fawkes).
- ★ Wallenstein (1634), Duke of Freidland.¹³

10. Ridley, *The Jesuits*, p 201.

11. Orthodox Dervish orders had existed in Islam since the twelfth century. They were bound by a more than military discipline culminating in an autocratic centralisation. The word ‘Dervish’ means ‘mendicant’, and the Muslim orders represented the counterpart in Islam of the medieval Christian friars.

12. Kautsky actually wrote: ‘Jesuitism is Humanism at a lower mental level, robbed of its spiritual independence, rigidly organised and pressed in the service of the Church.’ – Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and his Utopia*, London, 1927 – MIA.

13. Fawkes was a pupil of the Jesuits, and the English provincial of the order, Garnett, was executed as a traitor for his share in the plot.

The fear that was instilled into contemporary governments by this technique of terror is well illustrated by the king who himself was to become their most illustrious victim, Henry IV of France, who told his Minister, the Duke of Sully, that if he did not come to terms with the Jesuits, they would:

... fall into designs of taking my life, which would render it miserable and melancholy, ever being in dread of being poisoned or assassinated, for these people have secret intelligence and correspondence everywhere, and much skill in influencing minds just as they please, so that it would be much better to be dead at once, being herein of the opinion of Caesar, that the mildest death is the one which is the least foreseen and expected.

As in the case of the Assassins, the powers-that-be struck back hard wherever possible. Many a Jesuit had his bowels ripped open on Tyburn before a howling mob, or was 'stretched a foot longer than God made him' upon the Tower rack – as the rack-master of Elizabeth once boasted in the case of the Jesuit Southwell.

So no doubt, reasoned the persecutors of the Assassins also.¹⁴

The remarkable resemblance so far traced between 'the Jesuits of Islam and the Assassins of Christendom' – as I have elsewhere styled these two famous movements of religious terrorism – can be completed by the common charge made against both orders, of possessing a 'secret doctrine' of scientific immoralism, coupled with an anti-social ethic. As we have already seen, the problematical 'all is permissible' of the Assassins was matched by 'the ends justifies the means' of the Jesuits, an ascription still more dubious. However, on the already cited principle that 'much smoke implies at least some fire', the practice of both organisations probably gave some justification for both charges, particularly as the fierce hostility of their

14. *Les Économies royales de Sully*, tome 5, Paris, 1820, p 113. Unlike that of the Assassins, the homicidal literature of the Jesuits has survived, in which the murder of heretics is defined and justified with all that mastery of subtle casuistry for which the Jesuit order was, and is, world famous. Suarez engaged in a once celebrated controversy with James I of England – whom the pupil of the Jesuits, Guy Fawkes, had tried to murder – in which the Jesuit theologian defended regicide against the Stuart king. The most famous of all Jesuit books advocating regicide was the celebrated *De Rege et de Institutiones Regis* of the Spanish Jesuit, Fr Juan de Mariana SJ, in 1599, which was burnt by the public hangman in both England and France, which openly advocated assassination, and which made the most subtle distinctions with regard to the use of poison and the dagger. This extraordinary subtle literature of the Jesuits on the subject of murder is of remarkable interest to psychologists. It abounds in equivocations and innuendoes, and is fully as subtle and far more detailed than is even De Quincey's 'murder considered as one of the fine arts'. Probably the great library of the Old Man at Alamut contained similar works – since we know that Hasan-ibn-Sabah was a profound student of dialectics – but the Mongols were more efficient than were even the public hangman of James the First and Elizabeth, and no copy has survived the destroying flames of Hulagu Khan. In that field, therefore, of homicidal literature the Jesuits remain *par excellence* apologists of religious murder – '*ad majorem Dei gloriam*' – 'for the greater glory of God'. See Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, *The Jesuits*, London, 1846, pp 113–16, for an examination of the Jesuit theory of 'dagger-law' and its scientific justification by the 'moral' theologians of the Company of Jesus. Mariana establishes a subtle distinction in the use of poison, for example, poison must not be given directly to a heretical prince, for this would be to compel him to commit suicide, contrary to Christian ethic, but it is 'lawful' to administer it indirectly, say, by scattering the poison on his clothes. The Jesuit manuals abound in distinctions of this ultra subtle nature.

contemporary worlds compelled both movements to assume so largely the character of secret societies.¹⁵

It can be inferred from the above that the Jesuits may have borrowed from the Assassins, though if so at second-hand and via the agency of the Dervish orders of an orthodox character. Certainly the resemblance between the two orders was extraordinarily close, more so even than in the case of the Templars; although, no doubt, this was partly as a result of similar historical tasks which confronted the movements founded both by Hasan-ibn-Sabah and Ignatius Loyola.

A modern writer sums up the relations between three great orders described above, the Assassins, the Jesuits and the Templars, in these terms:

Among the Jesuits we shall find this autocratic organisation, the flair for action, the habit of not recognising any authority except that derived from themselves – a body of men devoted solely to their work, living a life half-monastic, half-military, capable when necessary of mingling in the life of the age, without losing their moral integrity, whilst remaining, in accordance with a rule derived from the Musulman orders, under the jurisdiction of their head, whence the supreme power of the General amongst them as amongst their models. We know what hatred, what mystification, what legends have gathered around the Jesuits, as formerly around the Templars and the Assassins.¹⁶

So close indeed was the resemblance between the Assassins and the Jesuits that it struck at least one acute contemporary of Guy Fawkes, Mariana and Henry IV of France, despite the mist of legend which then veiled the true features of the oriental body. For in 1614 there appeared in Paris a pamphlet which bore this highly significant title: *Assassination of the King, or Maxims of the Old Man of the Vatican Mountain and His Assassins Practised at the Expense of the Late King Henry the Great*. Henry was murdered on 14 May 1610.

The unknown author had a keen eye! There are, in fact, few resemblances in all history closer or more remarkable than that between the followers of 'the Old Man of

15. We have not forgotten that the phrase ascribed to the Jesuits only occurs once in their voluminous literature, and then the moral theologian who used it – Hermann Busenbaum – carefully restricted it to the obscure point of sexual ethics which he was treating in the context. It seems, however, to be generally agreed that Pascal's famous attack on the company in his celebrated *Provincial Letters* (1656–57) had a substratum of fact to justify it, and that the casuistry of the Jesuits at least verged on the immoral. Their well-known theory of 'probabilism', for example, when authorities clash, a minority opinion may be safely followed, obviously lends itself to gross abuse. In China, for instance, where the Jesuits conducted missions with phenomenal success in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is well known that the order went to amazing lengths in 'reconciling' Christianity with Chinese paganism, for example, ancestor worship was declared to be a 'civil rite' and as such 'lawful' to Christians. Confucius was declared to be a Christian saint, etc, etc. This curious amalgamation finally went so far that the Pope had to intervene to stop this 'Christianity without the Cross'.

To complete the present parallel of the Jesuits with the Assassins we may add that the learned Isaac Taylor, one of Loyola's ablest biographers, has placed it on record that, in his opinion, Jesuitism is quite capable of breaking altogether with Christianity and with the Catholic Church would it ever come to suit its interest to do so. There is much in the history of the company, in China and, for that matter, in Europe also, to lend considerable support for this view. As we have already seen, the Assassins practically reached the point of complete segregation from Islam. See Isaac Taylor, *Loyola and Jesuitism in Its Rudiments*, London, 1849.

16. Betty Bouthoul, *Le Grand Maître des Assassins*, Paris, 1936, p 227.

the Mountain' and those of Ignatius Loyola and his successors, the 'Black Popes'. Nor does the entire history of terrorism know two movements that terrorised their contemporary worlds so long and so effectively, and which continue to exercise both upon the curious student and also upon the general public a fascination so snakelike as is invariably aroused by the dreaded Assassins and by the still more dreaded Jesuits.

C: The Thugs (Thags): I have not been able to trace any certain, or even probable, connection between the Assassins and the famous Hindu confraternity of religious ritual murderers known as the Thugs (or, less commonly but more exactly, Thags). I subjoin, however, a brief reference to this once formidable sect, as it is just possible that there may have been a remote and second-hand connection between these two sects of religious terrorism.

On the whole, such a connection seems very improbable. The Thugs who gave the British authorities so much trouble in the early part of the nineteenth century, were a Hindu, not a Muslim, sect, sacred to the Goddess Kali (or Durga); and they killed solely by strangulation with the noose. They always 'hunted in threes' – a custom which may have been sacred to the Hindu trinity, the 'trimurti', viz: Brahma, Siva, Vishnu. On account of their dedication to the cult of a goddess, the Thugs never killed women. There is no record of any female victim of the Assassins, but then the order did not kill for pleasure, and women played but little part in the oriental politics of the Middle Ages.¹⁷

A remote connection, however, is not impossible. The Assassins, as we have seen, certainly borrowed doctrines from the religious philosophy of India, viz: reincarnation, pantheism, etc, and the Hindu Thugs traditionally claimed descent from 'seven Mohammedan tribes'.¹⁸ It is just conceivable that some remote traces of the Assassins may have reached them. But, except for the fact of killing, there is not much real resemblance between the dagger-using da'is of the Sheikh of the Mountain and the Hindu devotees who used the rope solely for killing and who dedicated to Kali, their terrible four-armed blood-smeared goddess, the last choking gasp of their ritually-strangled victims.¹⁹

Two modern movements present some points of resemblance with the Assassins – viz: the Mormons and the Nihilists. We may, therefore, be excused for glancing at them, though any direct connection in either case with the Assassins may be dismissed as definitely impossible.

D: The Mormons: The Mormon sect or religion was started by Joseph Smith in America in the early years of the nineteenth century. As is well known, the creed is based on 'revelations', a forgery, received by Smith in 1820–24. In the puritanical 'fundamentalist' America of the period, the New Bible – *The Book of Mormon* – and its adherents were received in a manner the reverse of cordial. Smith and his brother were lynched in 1844, and the life of the sect was made so unbearable that it finally set out on its famous trek westwards to the then unexplored wilderness of Utah.

17. The Jesuits usually also go about in threes. The reason for this custom, however, seems to lie in the domain of espionage and for the express purpose of preventing the formation of mutual attachments unknown to, and therefore beyond the control of, the order and of their superiors.

18. JN Farquhar, 'Thags', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 12, Edinburgh, 1921, pp 259–61.

19. According to some authorities, the Thugs also got ceremonially drunk on hashish – the Indian 'bhang'. But the use of this drug was not confined to the Assassins, for it was widely used throughout the East.

This march was accomplished after incredible hardships under the leadership of Brigham Young, the Mormon 'Moses', one of the most remarkable men in American history. In Utah the immigrants hewed social order out of the chaos of the primeval wilderness and established one of the most prosperous communities to be found in the American continent, where their descendants still reside.

The evolution of the Mormons suggests some remarkable points of resemblance with that already traced in the case of the Assassins. Both communities professed a heresy which, while claiming to be a legitimate offshoot of the prevailing religion, was received with execration in a contemporary atmosphere of narrow and fanatically intolerant orthodoxy. Both were forced to fly to remote mountains and wildernesses, respectively to Rudbar and to Utah, to the Caspian and the Salt Lake, in order to escape the fury of an outraged world in which neither sect was numerous nor strong enough to resist by force of arms in open warfare. Both sects, originally mild and inoffensive, were maddened by persecution into retaliating by murder and terror; and, the most extraordinary similarity of all, the actual terrorists of both went by the self-same style of 'destroying angels'. Both the Persian and American 'Assassins' terrorised wide areas. Both also were accused of murders which it is certain, or probable, that they did not actually commit. There are, in fact, few more striking parallels in all history than that between that grim and sinister figure, Brigham Young, the American 'Hasan-ibn-Sabah', and his Mormon 'destroying angels', and their medieval oriental prototypes. However, the above coincidences, remarkable as they are, cannot accurately be described as more than coincidences. The early Mormons were not learned and had probably never heard of the followers of Hasan-ibn-Sabah.²⁰

E: The Nihilists: Distinct resemblances exist between the Assassins and the modern Russian movement of Anarchism or Nihilism, which carried on a reign of terror against the Tsars and the dominant classes in Russia throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The Nihilists, like the Assassins, combined advanced culture with ruthless terrorism. Themselves representing the Westernised intelligentsia, and as such the most highly educated section of Russian society, they were goaded by the brutal oppression of the primitive Tsarist regime into the most savage reprisals. Tsar Alexander II (1881), Grand Dukes, leading statesmen such as the Prime Minister, Stolypin (1911), high police officials, etc, were murdered by these terrorist intellectuals, prior to the rise of the mass movement of Bolshevism in the present century.²¹

The Nihilist creed was summarised in all its stark purity by Nechayev, that strange and sinister figure who eventually died in the dungeons of the dreaded

20. The Mormon 'destroying angels' were chiefly used to massacre intending immigrants into Utah, or renegade Mormons escaping out of it. The Mormons have tried to make Red Indians responsible for these murders, but their own complicity seems to be proven, at any rate in some cases. When, twenty years later, the USA took over Utah, the Mormon 'Bishop' John D Lee and several 'Angels' were executed on account of these murders: I Woodbridge Riley, 'Latter-Day Saints (Mormons)', in James Hastings, John Selbie and Louis Gray (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 11, Edinburgh, 1920, pp 82-90.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in his romance *A Study in Scarlet*, has vividly portrayed the atmosphere of terror which surrounded the Mormon 'angels' in their work of death.

21. Bolshevism has practised mass executions when in power, but has always denounced individual terrorism and assassination, on the grounds that it is petty-bourgeois and develops an anti-social attitude. Bolshevism has consequently put an end to Nihilism and to individual assassination.

Tsarist fortress of St Peter and St Paul (1882) after a lifetime of alternate terrorism and prison, which would make the brief but incredible career of this 'enemy of society' the theme for the most superb historical novel of the century.

In his *Revolutionary Catechism* – formerly ascribed to the famous Anarchist, Michael Bakunin, but now usually believed to be the authentic work of Nechayev – the young terrorist sums up his creed:

The revolutionary despises and hates present-day social morality in all its forms and motives. He regards everything as moral which helps the triumph of revolution... All soft and enervating feelings of relationship, friendship, love, gratitude, even honour, must be stifled in him by a cold passion for the revolutionary cause...

Day and night he must have one thought, one aim – merciless destruction... And poison, the knife, the rope, etc. In this struggle, revolution sanctifies everything alike.²²

The 'all is permissible' ascribed to the Assassins re-echoes across the ages in this stark affirmation of scientific immoralism which embodies the working creed of the Nihilist terrorist. Its author himself lived up to his grim creed. Nechayev, who after ten years in the subterranean dungeons of Europe's most dreaded fortress, yet urged his would-be rescuers, who had burrowed with infinite difficulty to his living tomb to leave him to rot, but, at all cost, to kill the Tsar, was worthy of the 'self-devoted ones' themselves. And in his case, there was no hashish here nor paradise hereafter! In men of such stamp the spirit of Hasan-ibn-Sabah lived again!²³

It is clear from the examples given above that not only was the sect of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' an important terrorist movement in its own day and generation, but also that it exercised a considerable influence upon the course of subsequent terrorist movements, and through their agency, upon world history in general. Moreover, it is reasonable to infer from their regular recurrence in movements entirely untouched by the direct or indirect influence of the Assassins, of the permanent principles of the terrorist art, how brilliantly these principles had been grasped by 'the Old Man of the Mountain' and his order. The very name 'Assassin' itself constitutes the epitaph, the homage paid by universal recognition, to Hasan-ibn-Sabah and his 'self-devoted ones'.

Conclusion: I think it will now be clear that the regime of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' was far removed from that Jacobin 'red fool fury of the Seine', with which reactionary partisans such as von Hammer-Purgstall liked to compare it. Far from being subversive, it was conservative; in the fortresses of the Assassins were kept alight the lamps of the learning, culture and intellectual freedom which elsewhere were dimmed by the forces of barbarism, till at last even their splendour was extinguished and a Dark Age closed in on Asia which only now pales to a new dawn.

The most famous of ideal communities is that of Plato's Republic where his guardians pass a life of scholarship and contemplation in the midst of their communist state. In Plato's last book, *The Laws*, written a generation later, when his

22. Cecil Delisle Burns, *Principles of Revolution*, London, 1920.

23. HE Kaminsky, *Michel Bakounine la vie d'un révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1938, p 268; also Max Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution*, London, 1939.

contemporary culture was falling into decay, the utopia had become a fortress guarded by armed men from the sordid intrusions of a barbarous world.

Fifteen centuries after Plato, Hasan-ibn-Sabah made a reality of the platonic dream, for he too recognised that in this harsh world the philosopher-king can flourish only behind insurmountable walls and that, for the few to be free to seek for truth, the many must be kept at bay by terror.

The Assassins, accordingly, present us the intriguing spectacle of mutually supporting opposites, of wisdom safeguarded by ignorance, of free thought by fanaticism, of the utmost daring in speculation by an utter submission of intellect and will.

Epilogue

In 1935 the holiday crowds thronging the race-course of Epsom for that annual classic of the turf, the Derby Stakes, beheld a sight sportsmanlike indeed, but nonetheless somewhat unusual, indeed, I believe, unprecedented. For this year the 'blue riband' of the horse-racing world was won by a man not of British race, albeit a British subject, HH the Aga Khan, an Indian potentate of wealth and geniality, not unknown *inter alia* in sporting circles, and in particular, in the racing world.

Hence, despite his foreign appearance, the 'sportsmen' who frequented the annual racing classic lived up to their true name and gave the Indian prince a cordial welcome as true to the hallowed ritual of the turf, as he led in the winner amid the customary plaudits of the vast crowd thronging the downs. After all, he was a better sportsman than that other Eastern potentate, the former Shah of Persia, who when on a visit to Queen Victoria had refused even to see the Derby run, on the truly original ground that he had always known that, 'One horse could run faster than another and he did not care which one did so!'

The cheering crowds, though it is unlikely that they knew it, had before then the living relic of the strangest and most terrible dynasty which has ever reigned upon this earth: the pontiffs of the Assassins. For the Aga Khan is the Chief of the Khoja sect, an offshoot of the Ismailis, and a judgement of the High Court of Bombay – delivered in 1844 – had established his father's claim to be the lineal descendant of Rukn-u'd-Din, eighth and last grand-master of Alamut, and the victim of the Mongols.

Hence the genial Indian gentleman and the smiling winner of the Derby, who led in the winner of England's premier sporting classic in 1935, could trace back his descent in unbroken line from Hasan-ibn-Sabah's Vizier and immediate successor, Kiya-Buzurg-Umid, the second pontiff of the Assassins, and the direct ancestor of the six succeeding Lords of Alamut and the most sinister and enigmatic of all the shadowy figures who haunt the margin of history. The historical highway from Egypt to Epsom ran clear!

The holiday crowds who then cheered beneath the dazzling blue skies of an English summer could not in all probability have proceeded for any length along that winding road across the ages. But had some 'time machine', of a kind dear to the authors of sociological Utopias, been at hand to conduct them with seven-league boots to its distant source, the cheers of the cockney crowds would, belike, have frozen in their throats, choked by stark horror.

For, if 'Merrie England' with its cheering crowds, formed the starting point of the magic journey, at the terminus there awaited the time-travellers a world as bizarre and as remote from their own world of everyday reality as the mind of man can well conceive. For this was the sight they would have seen: the moon riding high over the Caspian Sea and the black gorges of Rudbar, lighting up the magic gardens of Alamut, those enchanted dream-drugged gardens, whence the white-robed 'destroying angels' of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' quitted his earthly paradise and sped swiftly, dagger in hand, down the Valley of the Shadow of Death.