

## **Factors Promoting Self-Sacrifice: Make Believe**

*By Eric Hoffer*

Dying and killing seem easy when they are part of a ritual, ceremonial, dramatic performance or game. There is need for some kind of make-believe in order to face death unflinchingly. To our real, naked selves there is not a thing on earth or in heaven worth dying for. It is only when we see ourselves as actors in a staged (and therefore unreal) performance that death loses its frightfulness and finality and becomes an act of make-believe and a theatrical gesture. It is one of the main tasks of a real leader to mask the grim reality of dying and killing by evoking in his followers the illusion that they are participating in a grandiose spectacle, a solemn or light-hearted dramatic performance.

Hitler dressed eighty million Germans in costumes and made them perform in a grandiose, heroic and bloody opera. In Russia, where even the building of a latrine involves some self-sacrifice, life has been an uninterrupted soul-stirring drama going on for thirty years, and its end is not yet. The people of London acted heroically under a hail of bombs because Churchill cast them in the role of heroes. They played their heroic role before a vast audience—ancestors, contemporaries and posterity—and on a stage lighted by a burning world city and to the music of barking guns and screaming bombs. It is doubtful whether in our contemporary world, with its widespread individual differentiation, any measure of general self-sacrifice can be realized without theatrical hocus-pocus and fireworks. It is difficult to see, therefore, how the present Labor government in England can realize its program of socialization, which demands some measure of self-sacrifice from every Briton, in the colorless and undramatic setting of socialist Britain. The untheatricality of most British Socialist leaders is a mark of uprightness and intellectual integrity, but it handicaps the experiment of nationalization which is undoubtedly the central purpose of their lives.

The indispensability of play-acting in the grim business of dying and killing is particularly evident in the case of armies. Their uniforms, flags, emblems, parades, music, and elaborate etiquette and ritual are designed to separate the soldier from his flesh-and-blood self and mask the overwhelming reality of life and death. We speak of the theater of

war and of battle scenes. In their battle orders army leaders invariably remind their soldiers that the eyes of the world are on them, that their ancestors are watching them and that posterity shall hear of them. The great general knows how to conjure an audience out of the sands of the desert and the waves of the ocean.

Glory is largely a theatrical concept. There is no striving for glory without a vivid awareness of an audience—the knowledge that our mighty deeds will come to the ears of our contemporaries or “of those who are to be.” We are ready to sacrifice our true, transitory self for the imaginary eternal self we are building up, by our heroic deeds, in the opinion and imagination of others.

In the practice of mass movements, make-believe plays perhaps a more enduring role than any other factor. When faith and the power to persuade or coerce are gone, make-believe lingers on. There is no doubt that in staging its processions, parades, rituals and ceremonials, a mass movement touches a responsive chord in every heart. Even the most sober-minded are carried away by the sight of an impressive mass spectacle. There is an exhilaration and getting out of one's skin in both participants and spectators. It is possible that the frustrated are more responsive to the might and splendor of the mass than people who are self-sufficient. The desire to escape or camouflage their unsatisfactory selves develops in the frustrated a facility for pretending—for making a show—and also a readiness to identify themselves wholly with an imposing mass spectacle.