

THE TOTALITARIAN FACE OF ISIS

Beginning in 1966, at the outset of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards went on a rampage destroying museums and bulldozing graves. Now ISIS is doing the same thing in Iraq. Sledgehammers have been used to behead statues and other artifacts at the Mosul Museum—winged bulls dating to the seventh century B.C. have been smashed—a winged lion has been defaced, and other antiquities have been annihilated. Great works of art, extending to the ancient Assyrian empire, have been ransacked. This happened just a few days after the burning of the Mosul Public Library. In addition, tombs have been destroyed.

This is not the face of authoritarianism—this is the face of totalitarianism. Authoritarian dictators want to monopolize their power, but they have no interest in upending the past; they leave libraries, museums, and gravesites untouched. ISIS, following Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, wants to eradicate the collective memory of the people, which is why it goes beyond killing men, women, and children: by destroying ancient works of art, and turning over graves, the totalitarians seek to erase the past, thus paving the way for the future.

Totalitarians assault art and religion precisely because they bind people to their roots, thus creating an obstacle to the new social order. ISIS barbarians want to do more than kill Christian Assyrians, and those who are not just like them—they want to kill everything that ties the present to the past.

The Obama administration does not understand ISIS because it does not understand the mind-set of totalitarians. It is dealing with an apocalyptic movement that is fueled by a desire to own the past, the present, and the future.