Totalitarianism

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John Christian Laursen

TOTALITARIANISM. Totalitarianism is a concept rooted in the horror of modern war, revolution, terror, genocide, and, since 1945, the threat of nuclear annihilation. It is also among the most versatile and contested terms in the political lexicon. At its simplest, the idea suggests that despite Fascist/Nazi "particularism" (the centrality of the nation or the master race) and Bolshevist "universalism" (the aspiration toward a classless, international brotherhood of man), both regimes were basically alike—which, as Carl Friedrich noted early on, is not to claim that they were wholly alike. Extreme in its denial of liberty, totalitarianism conveys a regime type with truly radical ambitions. Its chief objectives are to rule unimpeded by legal restraint, civic pluralism, and party competition, and to refashion human nature itself.

Coined in May 1923 by Giovanni Amendola, *totalitarianism* began life as a condemnation of Fascist ambitions to monopolize power and to transform Italian society through the creation of a new political religion. The word then quickly mutated to encompass National Socialism, especially after the Nazi "seizure of power" in 1933. By the mid-1930s, invidious comparisons among the German, Italian, and Soviet systems as totalitarian were becoming common; they increased considerably once the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed in 1939. Meanwhile, recipients of the totalitarian label took different views of it. Although, in the mid 1920s, Benito Mussolini and his ideologues briefly embraced the expression as an apt characterization of their revolutionary élan, Nazi politicians and propagandists saw a disconcerting implication. Granted, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, during the early 1930s, had a penchant for cognate expressions such as "total state"; so, too, did sympathetic writers such as Ernst Forsthoff and Carl Schmitt. At around the same time, Ernst Jünger was busy expounding his idea of "total mobilization." But "totalitarianism" was treated with greater circumspection. The *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community), Nazi spokesmen insisted, was unique: the vehicle of an inimitable German destiny based on a national, racially based, rebirth. *Totalitarianism* suggested that German aspirations were a mere variant on a theme; worse, a theme that current usage extrapolated to the Bolshevist foe.

Once Fascism and Nazism were defeated, a new global conflict soon emerged, and with it a reinvigorated role for "totalitarianism." Anxiety over Soviet ambitions in Europe prompted Churchill's use of the term twice in his "Iron Curtain" speech on March 5, 1946, at Fulton, Missouri. A year later, the Truman Doctrine entrenched the word in American foreign policy and security jargon. Then the Cold War took its course, punctuated by the Berlin Airlift, the building of the Berlin Wall, the Sino-Soviet treaties, the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Hungarian, Czech, and Polish uprisings. At each turn, the language of totalitarianism received a further boost, though there were significant national variations in the credence it received. In the United States, the language of totalitarianism, despite dissenting voices, had wide appeal across the political spectrum. In France, by contrast, it had practically none until the decay of existentialism and the appearance of Solzhenitsyn's work on the Soviet Gulag triggered a major attitudinal shift. Postwar Germany represents an intermediate case: officially sanctioned by the Federal Republic, *totalitarianism* became the focus of major intellectual controversy from the late 1960s onward.

Even periods of engagement with the Soviet Union—notably détente and the Ronald Reagan–Mikhail Gorbachev dialogue—stimulated debate over totalitarianism. Some commentators optimistically announced its softening and demise, while others deplored collaborating with the totalitarian enemy. During the Soviet Union's last decade, Western academics and foreign policy experts argued over the distinction between two kinds of regime. Authoritarian regimes (sometimes also called "traditional" or "autocratic") typified the apartheid state in South Africa, Iran under the Pahlavis, and the South American military juntas. Though hierarchical, vicious, and unjust, they had limited goals, and they left large parts of society (religious practice, family, and work relations) untouched. Conceivably, they were capable of reformist evolution toward representative government. In contrast, totalitarian regimes were depicted as utopian, inherently expansionist, and indelibly tyrannical, an evil empire. Treating them as normal states was folly. Meanwhile, in central Europe, embattled oppositionists during the late 1970s and 1980s were coining terms that suggested novel permutations on the classical model. "Posttotalitarian" regimes, suggested Václav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), retained a brutal apparatus of coercion but were no longer able to enthuse their populations with faith. Resistance required puncturing a hollow, mechanically recited ideology by everyday acts of noncompliance and by "living in truth" (that is, by speaking and acting honestly).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, twenty-first-century Islamism and the "war against terror" continued to keep the idea of totalitarianism salient. Yet if all these experiences are inseparable from the discourse of totalitarianism, its longevity has also been promoted by three rather different factors. One factor is the term's elasticity. It can be applied either to institutions or to ideologies, to governments or to movements, or to some combination of all of these. Additionally, it can be invoked to delineate an extant reality or a desire, myth, aim, tendency, experiment, and project. *Total* and its cognates (*totality, total war,* etc.) are commonplaces of the current age, so it is unsurprising that *totalitarianism* is also one. A second factor, more important still, is the role played by journalists, novelists, poets, playwrights, and filmmakers in publicly disseminating the images of totalitarian domination. Their role was to ensure that totalitarianism never became a recondite, academic term but one central to the vernacular of educated people. Totalitarianism was a buzzword of political journalism before it received, in the late 1940s and 1950s, searching treatment by social science and political theory. Its

first literary masterpiece was Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1941) with its sinister portrayal of the Communist confessional. Many great works on a similar theme followed, making totalitarianism vivid and unforgettable to readers electrified by the pathos and terror such writing evoked.

Still, no novelist is more responsible for the notion that totalitarianism penetrates the entire human personality, dominating it from within, than George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903–1950). That view appeared nothing less than prescient when stories later circulated in the 1950s about "brainwashing" of captured prisoners of war (POWs) during the Korean War. Orwell deserves a special place in any historical audit of totalitarianism for another reason. *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) introduced terms—"Thought Police," "Big Brother," "Doublethink"—that have since entered the English language as unobtrusively as those of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. So long as his work appears in the secondary school and university curricula, totalitarianism as an idea will survive. In a similar way, no one is more responsible for informing a general public about the Soviet Gulag than Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (b. 1918). To his extraordinary novels, memoirs, and what he called "experiments in literary investigation," one may add the work of Osip Mandelstam, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Souvarine, and Boris Pasternak. Each bequeathed a searing portrait of the depravity and recklessness of "totalitarian" systems.

Finally, totalitarianism's endurance as a term owes much to its capacity for provocative and counterintuitive application. It was not only heterodox Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse who indicted modern pluralist regimes for a systemically imbecilic, one-dimensional, and totalitarian mass culture. Liberals such as Friedrich Hayek also warned in 1944 of totalitarian developmental tendencies—particularly the fetish with state planning and intervention—that were paving the "road to serfdom." Many critics of the New Deal took a similar view; Herbert Hoover notoriously called Franklin Delano Roosevelt a "totalitarian liberal." Also disquieting was the sociologist Erving Goffman's contention in *Asylums* (1961) that Nazi death camps were broadly comparable to widely accepted "total institutions" such as the asylum, prison, barracks, and orphanage. The implication was that totalitarianism was not an exotic species of regime "over there" but a legitimized institution or trend deeply embedded within modernity as a whole.

Origins, Trajectory, Causation

Theorists of totalitarianism take very different views of its origins. For some, Hannah Arendt foremost among them, totalitarianism is radically new, an unprecedented development that attended Europe's economic, political, and moral ruination during and after World War I. From this perspective, attempts to locate a long-established lineage of totalitarianism are fundamentally mistaken. So, too, are analogies of totalitarianism with Caesarist, Bonapartist, and other dictatorial regimes. Totalitarianism is conjunctural or unique, not an extreme version of something previously known. The point of using the term is precisely to show the novelty of the regime type and the crisis it denotes. Other writers, conversely, believe that totalitarianism has deeper roots. Hence it might be said that totalitarianism is a perverted outgrowth of the Martin Luther–sanctioned authoritarian state, or an exaggerated legacy of tsarist intolerance. Or it might be agued that "totalitarian dictatorship" is ancient, prefigured in the Spartan state or the Roman imperial regime of Diocletian (r. 284–305). That was the judgment of Franz Neumann, who in addition claimed that National Socialism had revived the "fascist dictatorship" methods of the fourteenth-century Roman demagogue Cola di Rienzo. Nor, according to still others, should totalitarianism be understood as an exclusively occidental institution. Karl Wittfogel in *Oriental Despotism* (1957) found "total power" in the hydraulic governance of ancient China. And while sinologists have major reservations about describing Maoism as totalitarian, victims such as Harry Wu, imprisoned for nineteen years in the Chinese Laogai, exhibit no such compunction. Totalitarianism has also been located in Africa, for instance, in the rule of Shaka Zulu, while the Soviet Union itself was often depicted as a hybrid entity, more "Asian" than Western.

The search for the roots of totalitarian ideas, as distinct from institutions, has generated yet another fertile literature. Karl Popper found protototalitarianism in Plato. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno spied a totalitarian dialectic evolving out of an "Enlightenment" fixation on mathematical formalization, instrumental reason, and the love of the machine. J. L. Talmon discovered a creedal, "totalitarian democracy" arising from one tendency among eighteenth-century philosophies. Enunciated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Morelly (fl. mid-eighteenth century), and Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–1785); radicalized by the French Revolution, especially during its Jacobin phase; reincarnated in the Babouvist conspiracy, "totalitarian democracy" amounted to a leftist "political messianism" that preached the arrival of a new order: homogenous, egalitarian, yet supervised by a virtuous revolutionary vanguard able to divine the general will. This reminds one of Alexis de Tocqueville's observation, in *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), that the Revolution's "ideal" was nothing less than "a regeneration of the whole human race. It created an atmosphere of missionary fervor and, indeed, assumed all the aspects of a religious revival." That "strange religion," he continued, "has, like Islam, overrun the whole world with its apostles, militants, and martyrs" (p. 44).

Tocqueville's reference to Islam was deliberately discomfiting. It reminded his audience of what a modern "enlightened" European revolution shared with a declining Oriental civilization. Less than a century later, Bertrand Russell augmented that idea when he suggested that Bolshevism was like Islam, while John Maynard Keynes, in lapidary mood, remarked that "Lenin [was] a Mahomet, and not a Bismarck." Yet since Al Qaeda's suicide attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, a growing number of commentators have contended that it is *modern* Islam, or at least the current of Islamism associated with the legacy of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi Wahhabite movement, with which previous European revolutions are best compared. On this account, twenty-first century Islamist (and perhaps Baʿathi) ideology, practice, and organization bear many disquieting parallels with National Socialism and Bolshevism.

Modern Islamism is a radical movement in which pluralism is anathema, and in which politics itself is derided as a sphere of venality. To that extent it mirrors Islamic doctrine more generally since the suras of the Koran make no categorical or principled distinction between public and private spheres: every duty emanates from God alone. The state has no independent authority. Among Islamist militants, the substitute for political institutions is, above all, the fellow-feeling and camaraderie bestowed by membership of a secret society and the existential tests that confront the believer. "Muslim totalitarianism" reconfigures the capillary, decentralized organization of its Western precursors. Islamist militants combine the conspiratorial anti-Semitism of the Nazis (for whom they entertain a nostalgic admiration) with the pan-territorial ambitions of Bolshevik universalism. Islamist language is also replete with millenarian images of struggle, merciless destruction, and "sacred terror." Bent on purifying the world of Zionism, liberalism, feminism, and Crusader (U.S.) hegemony, Islamist ideology articulates a mausoleum culture of submission, nihilism, suicidal martyrdom for the cause, and mythological appeal to a world about to be reborn. That archaic demands for the reestablishment of the hallowed caliphate are pursued with all the means modern technology affords is consistent with the "reactionary modernism" of earlier totalitarian movements.

Such totalitarian parallels or intellectual lineages do not satisfy those who insist that family resemblance is no substitute for attributable historical causation. And since the early 1950s it has frequently been acknowledged that theorists of totalitarianism are much more adept at constructing morphologies than they are at establishing the precise relationship of totalitarian regimes to one another. François Furet argued this point eloquently, claiming too that Arendt's hodgepodge reconstruction of totalitarianism's career had failed to explain the "very different origins" of fascism and communism. Like Ernst Nolte, Furet was convinced that a "historico-genetic" approach to these movements was required to supplement the standard typological one. Like Nolte, as well, he believed that Bolshevism and National Socialism were historically linked, still a taboo contention among many leftists. Yet Furet disagreed with Nolte's contention that, essentially, National Socialism was a reaction to Bolshevism, a defensive if evil posture that gained credibility owing to the disproportionate influence of Jews in Marxist and socialist parties. According to Furet, the genealogical relationship between Bolshevism and National Socialism was not principally cause and effect. Each had its own endogenous history. The two movements' affinity derived instead from the fact that both of them (and Italian Fascism too—Mussolini was once a revolutionary socialist) emerged from the same "cultural" atmosphere: a late-nineteenth-, early-twentieth-century milieu suffused with "hatred of the bourgeois world." Deep and bitter loathing of that world was well established before World War I and thus also before the October Revolution. Equally, German anti-Semitism did not require Jews to be major spokesmen and leaders of the left to be an object of detestation. Anti-Semitism was already firmly established before Bolshevism erupted, because Jews were seen as a vanguard of democracy itself. Bourgeois democracy was the common enemy of totalitarian movements: the "communist sees it as the breeding ground of fascism, while the fascist sees it as the antechamber of Bolshevism (Furet and Nolte, p. 33)."

Totalitarian Characteristics

A conventional way of describing totalitarianism is to present a list of characteristics common to Italian Fascism, German National Socialism, and Soviet Bolshevism. (Other regimes may also be included—notably, Chinese Communism under the rule of Mao, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and Pol Pot's "Democratic Cambodia.") But how capacious should that portmanteau be? In *Totalitarianism,* published in 1954, Carl Friedrich itemized five elements, which, in a subsequent collaboration with Zbigniew Brzezinski, he increased to six. Yet, before that, Arthur M. Hill concocted fifteen points that Norman Davies, in *Europe: A History* (1997), expanded to seventeen. Recurrently mentioned features of totalitarianism include the following:

- A revolutionary, exclusive, and apocalyptical ideology that announces the destruction of the old order—corrupt and compromised—and the birth of a radically new, purified, and muscular age. Antiliberal, anticonservative, and antipluralist, totalitarian ideology creates myths, catechisms, cults, festivities, and rituals designed to commemorate the destiny of the elect.
- A cellular, fluid, and hydralike political party structure that, particularly before the conquest of state power, devolves authority to local militants. As it gains recruits and fellow believers, the party takes on a mass character with a charismatic leader at its head claiming omniscience and infallibility, and demanding the unconditional personal devotion of the people.
- A regime in which offices are deliberately duplicated and personnel are continually shuffled, so as to ensure chronic collegial rivalry and dependence on the adjudication of the one true leader. To the extent that legal instruments function at all, they do so as a legitimizing sham rather than a real brake on the untrammeled use of executive power. Indeed, the very notion of "the executive" is redundant since it presupposes a separation of powers anathema to a totalitarian regime.
- Economic-bureaucratic collectivism (capitalist or state socialist) intended to orchestrate productive forces to the regime's predatory, autarchic, and militaristic goals.
- Monopolistic control of the mass media, "professional" organizations, and public art, and with it the formulation of a cliché-ridden language whose formulaic utterances are designed to impede ambivalence, nuance, and complexity.
- A culture of martial solidarity in which violence and danger (of the trenches, the street fight, etc.) are ritually celebrated in party uniforms, metaphors

("storm troopers," "labor brigades"), and modes of address ("comrade"). Youth are a special audience for such a culture, but are expected to admire and emulate the "old fighters" of the revolution.

- The pursuit and elimination not simply of active oppositionists but, and more distinctively, "objective enemies" or "enemies of the people"—that is, categories of people deemed guilty of wickedness in virtue of some ascribed quality such as race or descent. Crimes against the state need not have actually been committed by the person accused of them. Hence the "hereditary principle" in North Korea where punishment is extended to three generations (the original miscreants, their children, and their grandchildren). Under totalitarianism, it is what people are, more than what they do that marks them for punishment. As Stéphane Courtois observes, "the techniques of segregation and exclusion employed in a 'class-based' totalitarianism closely resemble the techniques of 'race-based' totalitarianism" (p. 16). Soviet and Chinese Marxism may have claimed to represent humanity as a whole, but only a humanity divested first of millions—classes, categories—who were beyond the pale of Marxist doctrine. Its universalism was thus always, like National Socialism, an exclusive affair.

- Continual mobilization of the whole population through war, ceaseless campaigns, "struggles," or purges. Moreover, and notwithstanding ideological obeisance to ineluctable laws of history and race, totalitarian domination insists on febrile activity. The mercurial will of the leader and the people as a whole must constantly be exercised to produce miracles, combat backsliding, and accelerate the direction of the world toward its cataclysmic culmination.

- The pervasive use of terror to isolate, intimidate, and regiment all whom the regime deems menacing. Charged with this task are the secret police rather than the army, which typically possesses significantly fewer powers and less status than it does under a nontotalitarian dictatorship or "authoritarian" regime.

- The laboratory of totalitarian domination is the concentration camp. The experiment it conducts aims to discover the conditions under which human subjects become fully docile and pliable. In addition, a slave labor system exists side by side with a racial and/or class-oriented policy of genocide. In Nazi Germany, Jews were the principal objective enemy—over six million were murdered—but there were others such as Slavs and Gypsies. In the Soviet Union, key targets of annihilation or mass deportation were Cossacks (from 1920), kulaks (especially between 1930–1932), Crimean Tartars (1943), Chechens, and Ingush (both in 1944). The Great Purge of 1937–1938 is estimated to have killed close to 690,000 people, but this is dwarfed by the systematically induced famine in Ukraine in 1932–1933, thought to have killed around six million. Pol Pot's Cambodian Communist Party had a similar penchant for mass extermination, as did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao: the Chairman boasted that 700,000 perished in the 1950–1952 campaign against "counterrevolutionaries." The CCP targeted landlords and intellectuals, and through a policy of accelerated modernization created the famine of the Great Leap Forward that claimed around 30 million victims.

It should be noted that there is widespread disagreement among commentators about whether Italian Fascism is properly classified as a totalitarian system. Hannah Arendt and George Kennan thought otherwise. Mussolini's regime, on such accounts, is best comprehended as an extreme form of dictatorship or, according to Juan Linz, a species of "authoritarianism." Though preeminent, it shared power with other collective actors such as the monarchy, the military, and the Catholic Church in a way that was utterly alien to National Socialism and Bolshevism. Official anti-Semitism was less intense and less vigorously policed. And Mussolini was domestically ousted in a way that indicates a far more precarious grip on power than either Hitler or Stalin evinced.

The Coherence of Totalitarianism

Since the 1950s, the majority of academic commentators who favor the term have acknowledged that totalitarianism was never fully successful in its quest for complete domination. (Critics of the concept of totalitarianism are considered in the final section of this entry.) This was the key intuition of David Riesman in his correspondence with Hannah Arendt (he read in manuscript the last part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951]). It was also a theme of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System and its literary offspring—notably, Alex Inkeles and Raymond Bauer's *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (1961). To that extent, as Daniel Bell remarked, totalitarianism was always a concept in search of reality. Unlike political philosophers, moreover, social scientists tend to see totalitarianism as an ideal-type, a one-sided model constructed for research purposes, which also suggests that totalitarianism in the flesh can be of greater or lesser virulence. Studies of inmate camp "culture" lend further credence to the oxymoronic concession that totalitarianism had its limits. Tsvetan Todorov and Anne Applebaum show that even under conditions expressly designed to expunge all traces of solidarity, acts of "ordinary virtue" persisted. Hence there were always people who maintained their dignity (by keeping as clean as they could), who cared for others (sharing food, tending the sick), and who exercised the life of the mind (by reciting poetry, playing music, or committing to memory camp life so as to allow the possibility of its being fully documented later). Michel Mazor's luminous, yet astonishingly objective, autobiographical account of the Warsaw Ghetto (*The Vanished City,* 1955) expresses a similar message of hope. Survivors of death camps and Gulags have typically conveyed a different message, however. Crushed by a merciless regime determined to exterminate not only an individual's life, but the concept of humanity itself, inmates endured a vertiginous "gray zone" of collaboration and compromise.

Any list of totalitarian features, such as the one itemized above, raises an obvious question: What gives the typology its coherence? Or, to put the matter differently, is there some property that furnishes the whole with its master logic or integral animation? Two frequently rehearsed, and related, answers are discernible. The first takes up the pronounced totalitarian attachment to the will, dynamism, and movement. As early as 1925, Amendola was struck by the "wild radicalism" and "possessed will" of the Italian Fascists. Mussolini himself spoke proudly of "la nostra feroce volonta totalitaria" ("our fierce totalitarian will"). And the virtue of "fanaticism," "will," and "the movement" for the nation's well-being was tirelessly rehearsed by Hitler and Goebbels, as it was later by Mao. *Yundong* (movement, campaign) was among the most salient ideas of the Chairman, who specifically emphasized the importance of chaos. Sinologist Michael Schoenhals observes that in its original Maoist sense (since disavowed by Deng Xiaoping and his successors, who prefer to speak of an incremental *fazhan* or "development"), *yundong* entails the deliberate "shattering of all regular standards," the suspension of all stabilizing rules, norms, and standards that may apply in ordinary times. The goals of this regularized suspension—there were sixteen major national "movements" between 1950 and 1976—were to orchestrate hatred against the Party's latest enemy (often previously hallowed figures within the Party), to arouse superhuman efforts in support of economic targets, and incessantly to combat "revisionism" and the emergence of new elites. The Soviet Union during the heyday of Stalinism exhibited similar characteristics, as Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago explains:

> The point is, Larissa Fyodorovna, that there are limits to everything. In all this time something definite should have been achieved. But it turns out that those who inspired the revolution aren't at home in anything except change and turmoil: that's their native element; they aren't happy with anything that's less than on a world scale. For them, transitional periods, worlds in the making, are an end in themselves.

The centrality of flux and activism to the idea of totalitarianism is integral to classical academic accounts of the phenomenon. It prompted Franz Neumann, in *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942), to call the Third Reich a "movement state," and Ernst Fraenkel to describe it as a "dual state" in which the "normal" functions of the legal and administrative apparatus were constantly undermined by Party "prerogative"—Fraenkel's term for the maelstrom of feverish Nazi initiatives that unleashed bedlam without respite. Similarly, Sigmund Neumann entitled his comparative study of the Nazi, Fascist, and Bolshevist hurricanes *Permanent Revolution: The Total State in a World at War* (1942).

Still, the most influential account along these lines was that proffered by Hannah Arendt. Totalitarianism, she argued, was a mode of domination characterized far less by centralized coordination than by unceasing turbulence. To confuse totalitarianism with dictatorship or to see it as a type of dictatorship (or even state) was to miss a fundamental distinction. Once consolidated, dictatorships—for instance, military juntas—typically become routinized and predictable, domesticating and detaching themselves from the movements that were their original social basis. Totalitarian regimes, in contrast, rise to power on movements that, once installed in office, employ motion as their constitutive "principle" of domination. The volcanic will of the leader whose next decision could nullify all previous ones; rule by decree rather than law; the continual manufacture of new enemies; police institutions, Gulags, and death camps whose only purposes are to transform citizens into foes and transform individuals into an identical species and then into corpses: All these features characterize a regime-type of eternal transgression. "Terror," remarks Arendt, is itself "the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action" (p. 465). Indeed, it is the grotesque destructiveness and futility of totalitarian systems, their attack on every norm that might anchor human life in something stable, that makes them so resistant to methodical analysis.

A second thread that runs through discussions about totalitarianism is the pagan ardor that Fascism, National Socialism, and Bolshevism were capable of generating. Once more, Amendola was a pioneer in this line of interpretation, calling Fascism a "war of religion" that demands total devotion. More sympathetically, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, ghostwriter of Mussolini's "The Doctrine of Fascism" (1932), stressed the new movement's penetrative spirit. Of special significance was the myth of rebirth: the creation of a new nation or a world without classes, and the formation of a selfless New Man or Woman, untainted by decrepit habits. Fascism, Mussolini avowed, was the author of the Third Italian Civilization (the previous two being the Roman Empire and the Renaissance). Nazi ideology was also replete with notions of national redemption, the spirit of a rejuvenated people, and even the divine mission of the SS. World War I, and the community of front-line soldiers (*Frontsgemeinschaft*) or "trenchocracy" it witnessed, was typically identified as the crucible of this steely resurrection. Coup d'état strategizing, the battles to defeat the Whites during the civil war, and the perennial trumpeting of the class struggle, promoted a similar mentality among the Bolshevik leaders.

Commentators who stress the mythological component of totalitarianism—writing of "ersatz religions," "political religions," the "myth of the state," the "sacralization of politics," and "palingenesis"—include Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, Ernst Cassirer, Norman Cohn, Waldemar Gurian, Jacob Talmon, and Eric Voegelin. Worthy successors are Michael Burleigh, Roger Griffin, and Emilio Gentile. Gentile, while desisting from the view that political religion is the most important element of totalitarianism, nonetheless affirms that it is "the most dangerous and deadly weapon" in its ideological arsenal (p. 49). Civic religions, such as those found in the United States and France, are different from political religions because they celebrate a republican concept of freedom and law. Church and state are separated, but each has its legitimate sphere of activity. In contrast, the sacralization of politics under totalitarian rule, together with its liturgies, festivals, and cults, is marked by the deification of the leader; idolatrous worship of the state,

which arrogates to itself the exclusive right to determine Good and Evil; marginalization or destruction of traditional religion; orgiastic mass rallies; immortalization of the party fallen; the appeal to sacrifice; and the cult of death. Interpretations of totalitarianism that emphasize political religion have one notable implication. They suggest that totalitarianism is best understood not as a singular event, or a unique set of institutions, but as a recurrent possibility of the modern world shorn of its customary restraints.

Criticisms and Responses

At the risk of simplification, criticisms of the concept of totalitarianism may be divided into two main, though overlapping, types: moral-political and scientific. The first type of criticism takes different forms but often hinges on the argument that *totalitarianism* was employed during the Cold War as an ideological weapon of a particularly Manichaean, self-serving, and self-righteous kind. Starkly dividing the world into liberal democratic white-hats and communist black-hats, Abbott Gleason remarks, conveniently omitted the extent to which Western governments supported military and other regimes with bleak and bloody human-rights records. Describing military juntas as authoritarian rather than totalitarian made no difference to the people they murdered. A twist on this criticism, found among American disciples of the Frankfurt School, is that liberal democracy itself is not in principle the antithesis of totalitarianism, because both are disastrous permutations of "Enlightenment modernity." A rather different objection is that totalitarianism is an opportune way for former collaborators of Nazism, Bolshevism, and so forth, to dodge responsibility for their actions. Its exculpatory value turns on the claim that "resistance was impossible" or that "we were all brainwashed." Yet the charge of double standards is also made by those, such as Martin Malia, who vehemently defend the pertinence of *totalitarianism* as a label. Disavowing that term all too often means denying the evil symmetry of Nazism and Bolshevism. By recapitulating earlier leftist dogmas—that genuine antifascism required support for the Soviet Union, that comparisons with Nazi Germany are unacceptable because they play into the hands of U.S. imperialism—such denials can become an expedient means of rescuing Marxism from its real, sanguinary history. In a similar way, loose talk of the "dialectic of Enlightenment" is less a challenge to common sense than it is a meretricious affront to its very existence. In any case, the term *totalitarianism* preceded the Cold War by more than two decades.

Scientific objections to totalitarianism as an idea typically focus on a diverse set of issues. Critics argue that the notion is mistaken because:

- Totalitarianism is a fictive Orwellian dystopia instead of an empirical reality. The Soviet system, for instance, "did not exercise effective 'thought control,' let alone ensure 'thought conversion,' but in fact depoliticized the citizenry to an astonishing degree" (Hobsbawm, p. 394). Official Marxism was unspeakably dull and irrelevant to the lives of most people.
- *Totalitarianism* is a misnomer because in neither the Soviet Union nor Nazi Germany was terror total. Instead it was always focused on particular groups. In the Soviet Union, terror formed a radius in which danger was greatest the nearer one was to power and purge. In Germany, once active domestic opposition to the Nazis was defeated, and Jews were deported to the camps, most citizens existed at peace with a regime they deemed legitimate. The majority would never have considered themselves as terrorized by it. Distinguishing between seasoned adversaries and pesky grumblers, the undermanned Gestapo rarely intruded into normal life. Denunciation by citizens of one another was a more effective means of garnering information than the prying eye of the security state.
- The theory of totalitarianism fails to specify a mechanism to explain the internal transition of the Soviet Union and China to nontotalitarian phases. Indeed, the very evolution of such regimes toward humdrum routinization flies in the face of the idea that totalitarianism is above all a movement that cannot be pacified, and is the antithesis of all forms of political normality.
- Totalitarian regimes are too heterogeneous for them to be classified under a single rubric. Under Mao, for instance, the People's Liberation Army was a more powerful organ of control than the security forces, while Mao's prestige was periodically checked, and occasionally deflated, by other CCP leaders. The contrasts between Hitler and Joseph Stalin are, Ian Kershaw suggests, even more telling. While Stalin was a committee man who ascended to rule within a recently established system, Hitler was a rank outsider, strongly averse to bureaucratic work of all kinds. Similarly, while Stalin was an interventionist micromanager, Hitler had little to do with the actual functioning of government. People did not so much directly follow his detailed orders, of which there were few, as second guess what he wanted them to achieve, thereby "working toward the Führer." Then again, Hitler was a spectacular and mesmerizing orator; Stalin's words were leaden by comparison. Mass party purges characterize one system, but not the other (the liquidation of the Röhm faction in 1934 was a singular event). And finally the systems over which the men prevailed had a different impetus. Stalin's goal of rapid modernization was, some say, a humanly understandable, if cruelly executed, objective; that the end justifies the means is a standard belief of all tyrants. Conversely, the mass slaughter of the Jews and others was, for Hitler, an end in itself, unquestionably irrational if not insane.

All these objections are themselves the targets of rebuttal. Modernization at the expense of the nation it is intended to benefit seems hardly rational. Its victims rarely thought so. And did not Hitler, too, think in terms of instrumental means and ends? The goal was a purified Aryan civilization, regenerate,

martial, manly, and beautiful. To achieve it, putative nonhumans had to vanish from the face of the earth. Moreover, the transitions that Soviet and Chinese Communism witnessed by no means nullify the totalitarian model. They only appear to do so, Victor Zaslavsky argues, because of failure to distinguish between "system building" and "system maintenance" phases; the latter represents a more stable development, but one still mired in the militarization of society and mass surveillance. Where previous thinkers have erred is in identifying the "system building" stage with totalitarianism *tout court.* Finally, critics of the totalitarian model often object to it on spurious grounds. For to argue that totalitarianism was never systematic in its rule, never fully synchronized, but rather "chaotic," "wasteful," and "anarchic" is hardly a criticism of those such as Arendt who made such attributes pivotal to their theory. In good measure, her emphasis on movement is vindicated even by those who employ a different terminology. Examples include "regimes of continuous revolution" (enunciated by Michael Mann) and "cumulative radicalization" (preferred by Hans Mommsen).

Conclusion

As a vehicle for condemnation as well as analysis, *totalitarianism* is likely to remain a vibrant idea long into the twenty-first century. Its extension to radical Islam is already evident. And as a potent reminder of the terrible deeds of which humans are capable, the concept has few conceptual rivals. Principled disagreements as well as polemics about its value continue to mark its career. Present dangers, and anxious debates about how they should best be characterized, suggest that the age of totalitarianism is not yet over.

See also ***Authoritarianism; Communism; Fascism; Nationalism.***

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