

# Totalitarianism

**Totalitarianism** (or **totalitarian rule**) is a political system where the state holds total authority over the society and seeks to control all aspects of public and private life wherever necessary.<sup>[1]</sup>

The concept of totalitarianism was first developed in a positive sense in the 1920's by the Italian fascists. The concept became prominent in Western anti-communist political discourse during the Cold War era in order to highlight perceived similarities between Nazi Germany and other fascist regimes on the one hand, and Soviet communism on the other.<sup>[2][3][4][5][6]</sup>

Aside from fascist and Stalinist movements, there have been other movements that are totalitarian. The leader of the historic Spanish reactionary conservative movement called the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right declared his intention to "give Spain a true unity, a new spirit, a totalitarian polity..." and went on to say "Democracy is not an end but a means to the conquest of the new state. When the time comes, either parliament submits or we will eliminate it."<sup>[7]</sup>



Moloch of Totalitarianism – memorial of victims of repressions exercised by totalitarian regimes, at Levashovo, Saint Petersburg.

## Etymology

The notion of "totalitarianism" a "total" political power by state was formulated in 1923 by Giovanni Amendola who described Italian Fascism as a system fundamentally different from conventional dictatorships.<sup>[8]</sup> The term was later assigned a positive meaning in the writings of Giovanni Gentile, Italy's most prominent philosopher and leading theorist of fascism. He used the term "totalitario" to refer to the structure and goals of the new state. The new state was to provide the "total representation of the nation and total guidance of national goals."<sup>[9]</sup> He described totalitarianism as a society in which the ideology of the state had influence, if not power, over most of its citizens.<sup>[10]</sup> According to Benito Mussolini, this system politicizes everything spiritual and human:



Benito Mussolini

Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.<sup>[8]</sup>

As an example, he stated that "We must finish once and for all with the neutrality of chess. We must condemn once and for all the formula 'chess for the sake of chess', like the formula 'art for art's sake'. We must organize shockbrigades of chess-players, and begin immediate realization of a Five-Year Plan for chess."<sup>[11]</sup>

## Difference between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes

The term 'an authoritarian regime' denotes a state in which the single power holder - an individual 'dictator', a committee or a junta or an otherwise small group of political elite - monopolizes political power. However, a totalitarian regime attempts to control virtually all aspects of the social life including economy, education, art, science, private life and morals of citizens. "The officially proclaimed ideology penetrates into the deepest reaches of societal structure and the totalitarian government seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens."<sup>[8]</sup>

Totalitarianism is an extreme version of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism primarily differs from totalitarianism in that social and economic institutions exist that are not under governmental control. Building on the work of Yale political scientist Juan Linz, Paul C. Sondrol of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs has examined the characteristics of authoritarian and totalitarian dictators and organized them in a chart.<sup>[12]</sup>

|                   | <b>Totalitarianism</b> | <b>Authoritarianism</b> |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Charisma          | High                   | Low                     |
| Role conception   | Leader as function     | Leader as individual    |
| Ends of power     | Public                 | Private                 |
| Corruption        | Low                    | High                    |
| Official ideology | Yes                    | No                      |
| Limited pluralism | No                     | Yes                     |
| Legitimacy        | Yes                    | No                      |

Sondrol argues that while both authoritarianism and totalitarianism are forms of autocracy, they differ in "key dichotomies":

(1) Unlike their bland and generally unpopular authoritarian brethren, totalitarian dictators develop a charismatic 'mystique' and a mass-based, pseudo-democratic interdependence with their followers via the conscious manipulation of a prophetic image. (2) Concomitant role conceptions differentiate totalitarians from authoritarians. Authoritarians view themselves as individual beings, largely content to control; and often maintain the status quo. Totalitarian self-conceptions are largely teleological. The tyrant is less a person than an indispensable 'function' to guide and reshape the universe.

(3) Consequently, the utilisation of power for personal aggrandizement is more evident among authoritarians than totalitarians. Lacking the binding appeal of ideology, authoritarians support their rule by a mixture of instilling fear and granting rewards to loyal collaborators, engendering a kleptocracy.<sup>[12]</sup>

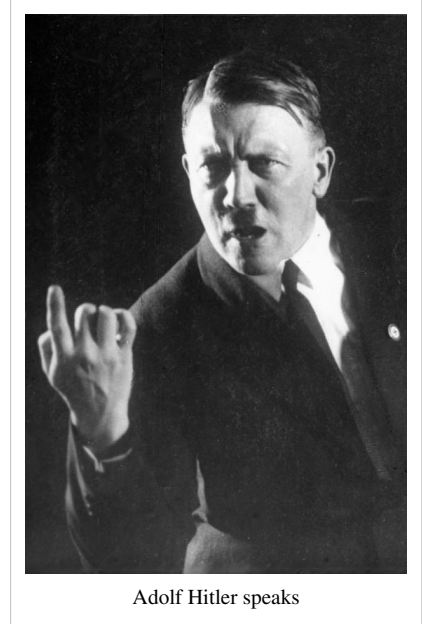
Thus, compared to totalitarian systems, authoritarian systems may also leave a larger sphere for private life, lack a guiding ideology, tolerate some pluralism in social organization, lack the power to mobilize the whole population in pursuit of national goals, and exercise their power within relatively predictable limits.

## Examples of the term's use

One of the first to use the term "totalitarianism" in the English language was the Austrian writer Franz Borkenau in his 1938 book *The Communist International*, in which he commented that it more united the Soviet and German dictatorships than divided them.<sup>[13]</sup> Isabel Paterson, in *The God of the Machine* (1943), used the term in connection with the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

F.A. Hayek helped develop the idea of totalitarianism in his classic defense of economic competition *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). In his Introduction, Hayek contrasts Western Anglo values with Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, stating that "the conflict between the National-Socialist "Right" and the "Left" in Germany is the kind of conflict that will always arise between rival socialist factions". He later conflates "Germany, Italy and Russia" going on to say that "the history of these countries in the years before the rise of the totalitarian system showed few features with which we are not familiar" (Chapter 1, The Abandoned Road).

During a 1945 lecture series entitled *The Soviet Impact on the Western World* (published as a book in 1946), the pro-Soviet British historian E. H. Carr claimed that "The trend away from individualism and towards totalitarianism is everywhere unmistakable", and that Marxism-Leninism was much the most successful type of totalitarianism, as proved by Soviet industrial growth and the Red Army's role in defeating Germany. Only the "blind and incurable" could ignore the trend towards totalitarianism, said Carr.<sup>[14]</sup>



Adolf Hitler speaks

Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1961), articulated an influential critique of totalitarianism: in both works, he contrasted the "open society" of liberal democracy with totalitarianism, and argued that the latter is grounded in the belief that history moves toward an immutable future in accordance with knowable laws.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argued that Nazi and State communist regimes were new forms of government, and not merely updated versions of the old tyrannies. According to Arendt, the source of the mass appeal of totalitarian regimes is their ideology, which provides a comforting, single answer to the mysteries of the past, present, and future. For Nazism, all history is the history of race struggle; and, for Marxism, all history is the history of class struggle. Once that premise is accepted, all actions of the state can be justified by appeal to Nature or the Law of History, justifying their establishment of authoritarian state apparatus.<sup>[15]</sup>

Scholars such as Lawrence Aronsen, Richard Pipes, Leopold Labedz, Franz Borkenau, Walter Laqueur, Karl Popper, Eckhard Jesse, Leonard Schapiro, Adam Ulam, Raymond Aron, Claude Lefort, Richard Löwenthal, Hannah Arendt, Robert Conquest, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Carl Joachim Friedrich and Juan Linz describe totalitarianism in slightly different ways. They all agree, however, that totalitarianism seeks to mobilize entire populations in support of an official state ideology, and is intolerant of activities which are not directed towards the goals of the state, entailing repression or state control of business, labour unions, churches or political parties.

## Cold War-era research

The political scientists Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski were primarily responsible for expanding the usage of the term in university social science and professional research, reformulating it as a paradigm for the Soviet Union as well as fascist regimes. For Friedrich and Brzezinski, the defining elements were intended to be taken as a mutually supportive organic entity composed of the following: an elaborating guiding ideology; a single mass party, typically led by a dictator; a system of terror; a monopoly of the means of communication and physical force; and central direction, and control of the economy through state planning. Such regimes had initial origins in the chaos that followed in the wake of World War I, at which point the sophistication of modern weapons and communications enabled totalitarian movements to consolidate power.

The German historian Karl Dietrich Bracher, whose work is primarily concerned with Nazi Germany, argues that the "totalitarian typology" as developed by Friedrich and Brzezinski is an excessively inflexible model, and failed to consider the "revolutionary dynamic" that Bracher asserts is at the heart of totalitarianism.<sup>[16]</sup> Bracher maintains that the essence of totalitarianism is the total claim to control and remake all aspects of society combined with an all-embracing ideology, the value on authoritarian leadership, and the pretence of the common identity of state and society, which distinguished the totalitarian "closed" understanding of politics from the "open" democratic understanding.<sup>[16]</sup> Unlike the Friedrich-Brzezinski definition Bracher argued that totalitarian regimes did not require a single leader and could function with a collective leadership, which led the American historian Walter Laqueur to argue that Bracher's definition seemed to fit reality better than the Friedrich-Brzezinski definition.<sup>[17]</sup>

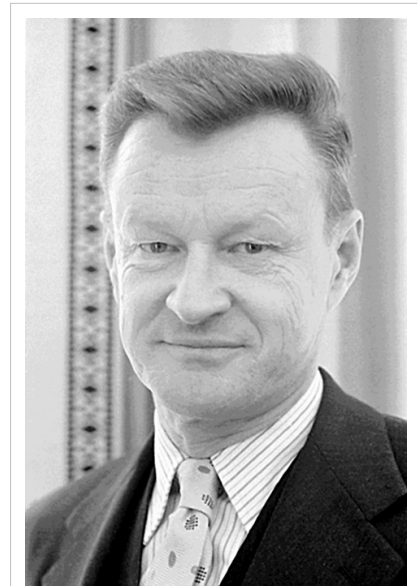
Eric Hoffer in his book *The True Believer* argues that mass movements like communism, Fascism and Nazism had a common trait in picturing Western democracies and their values as decadent, with people "too soft, too pleasure-loving and too selfish" to sacrifice for a higher cause, which for them implies an inner moral and biological decay. He further claims that those movements offered the prospect of a glorious future to frustrated people, enabling them to find a refuge from the lack of personal accomplishments in their individual existence. The individual is then assimilated into a compact collective body and "fact-proof screens from reality" are established.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Criticism and recent work with the concept

In the social sciences, the approach of Friedrich and Brzezinski came under criticism from scholars who argued that the Soviet system, both as a political and as a social entity, was in fact better understood in terms of interest groups, competing elites, or even in class terms (using the concept of the *nomenklatura* as a vehicle for a new ruling class).<sup>[19]</sup> These critics pointed to evidence of popular support for the regime and widespread dispersion of power, at least in the implementation of policy, among sectoral and regional authorities. For some followers of this 'pluralist' approach, this was evidence of the ability of the regime to adapt to include new demands. However, proponents of the totalitarian model claimed that the failure of the system to survive showed not only its inability to adapt but the



Chinese communists celebrate Joseph Stalin's 70th birthday, 1949



A number of thinkers, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, have argued that Nazi and Soviet regimes were equally totalitarian.

mere formality of supposed popular participation.

Further information: Collective leadership and History of the Soviet Union (1964–1982)

From a historical angle, the totalitarian concept has been criticized. Historians of the Nazi period inclined towards a functionalist interpretation of the Third Reich such as Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen and Ian Kershaw have been very hostile or lukewarm towards the totalitarianism concept, arguing that the Nazi regime was far too disorganized to be considered as totalitarian.<sup>[20]</sup>

In the field of Soviet history, the concept has been disparaged by the "revisionist" school, a group of mostly American left-wing historians, some of whose more prominent members are Sheila Fitzpatrick, Jerry F. Hough, William McCagg, Robert W. Thurston, and J. Arch Getty.<sup>[21]</sup> Though their individual interpretations differ, the revisionists have argued that the Soviet state under Stalin was institutionally weak, that the level of terror was much exaggerated, and that to the extent it occurred, it reflected the weaknesses rather the strengths of the Soviet state.<sup>[21]</sup> Fitzpatrick argued that since to the extent that there was terror in the Soviet Union, since it provided for increased social mobility, and thus far from being a terrorized society, most people in the Soviet Union supported Stalin's purges as a chance for a better life.<sup>[22]</sup>

Writing in 1987, Walter Laqueur commented that the revisionists in the field of Soviet history were guilty of confusing popularity with morality, and of making highly embarrassing and not very convincing arguments against the concept of the Soviet Union as totalitarian state.<sup>[23]</sup> Laqueur argued the revisionists' arguments with regard to Soviet history were highly similar to the arguments made by Ernst Nolte regarding German history.<sup>[23]</sup> Laqueur asserted that concepts such as modernization were inadequate tools for explaining Soviet history while totalitarianism was not.<sup>[24]</sup>

François Furet used the term "totalitarian twins"<sup>[25]</sup> in an attempt to link Stalinism<sup>[26]</sup> and Nazism.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Totalitarianism in architecture

Non-political aspects of the culture and motifs of totalitarian countries have themselves often been labeled innately "totalitarian". For example, Theodore Dalrymple, a British author, physician, and political commentator, has written for *City Journal* that brutalist structures are an expression of totalitarianism given that their grand, concrete-based design involves destroying gentler, more-human places such as gardens.<sup>[28]</sup> In 1984, author George Orwell described the Ministry of Truth as an "enormous, pyramidal structure of white concrete, soaring up terrace after terrace, three hundred metres into the air"; columnist Ben Macintyre of *The Times* has stated that that was "a prescient description of the sort of totalitarian architecture that would soon dominate the Communist bloc".<sup>[29]</sup>

Another example of totalitarianism in architecture is the Panopticon, a type of institutional building designed by English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The concept of the design is to allow a watchman to observe (-opticon) all (pan-) inmates of an institution without their being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. It was invoked by Michel Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish*) as metaphor for "disciplinary" societies and their pervasive inclination to observe and normalise.

## In popular culture

George Orwell's books *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* are famous for their dystopian depiction of totalitarian society, as is their lesser-known predecessor, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin. Additional totalitarian regimes are also depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

According to Soviet writer Fazil Iskander,<sup>[30]</sup> "Under the totalitarian regime, it was as if you were forced to live in the same room with an insanely violent man."

In Suzanne Collins' trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, the nation of Panem is ruled under a totalitarian government.

In the *Shadow Children* series by Margaret Peterson Haddix, the country is ruled under a totalitarian government.

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- [3] Achim Siegel, The totalitarian paradigm after the end of Communism: towards a theoretical reassessment, 1998, page 200 "Concepts of totalitarianism became most widespread at the height of the Cold War. Since the late 1940s, especially since the Korean War, they were condensed into a far-reaching, even hegemonic, ideology, by which the political elites of the Western world tried to explain and even to justify the Cold War constellation"
- [4] Nicholas Guilhot, The democracy makers: human rights and international order, 2005, page 33 "The opposition between the West and Soviet totalitarianism was often presented as an opposition both moral and epistemological between truth and falsehood. The democratic, social, and economic credentials of the Soviet Union were typically seen as "lies" and as the product of a deliberate and multiform propaganda...In this context, the concept of totalitarianism was itself an asset. As it made possible the conversion of prewar anti-fascism into postwar anti-communism
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- [22] Laqueur, Walter *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet history from 1917 to the Present*, New York: Scribner's, 1987 pages 225 & 228
- [23] Laqueur, Walter *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet history from 1917 to the Present*, New York: Scribner's, 1987 page 228
- [24] Laqueur, Walter *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet history from 1917 to the Present*, New York: Scribner's, 1987 page 233
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## Further reading

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## External links

- Totalitarianism (<http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/articles/col-totalitarianism.htm>) - Article on the origin and meaning of the term; gives many 20th century examples and contrasts with Authoritarianism
- FAES Totalitarianism and Human Nature: How and Why Communism Failed ([http://documentos.fundacionfaes.info/document\\_file/filename/474/00052-05\\_-\\_totalitarism\\_and\\_human.pdf](http://documentos.fundacionfaes.info/document_file/filename/474/00052-05_-_totalitarism_and_human.pdf))
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