

The Ideological Foundations

The dictators ... took their ideologies very seriously.

Definitions of Totalitarianism

Surprisingly, there has been a greater agreement among historians about how to define “totalitarianism” than there has been about whether the definition actually fits any of the states usually described as totalitarian. Advocates of the term stress: (1) the extraordinary powers of the leader; (2) the importance of an exclusionist ideology; (3) the existence of a single mass party; (4) a secret police prepared to use terror to eradicate all domestic opposition; (5) a monopoly of the communications media as well as over the educational systems; (6) a determination to change basic social, artistic, and literary values; and (7) an insistence that the welfare of the state be placed above the welfare of its citizens.

Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century,
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Much less agreement can be found among historians on the importance of purges to totalitarianism, the role of state economic planning, and the degree to which citizens of totalitarian states were able to maintain some sort of private life. Scholars who object to the term altogether note that even in the Soviet Union and Germany, where the governments were the most powerful, many individuals maintained private lives comparatively free of authoritarian controls. In the Soviet Union there were competing factions, interest groups, and bureaucratic networks that could defy government decrees. And industrial and military leaders in Germany, as well as the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy, all retained considerable autonomy. Proponents of the totalitarian concept assert that it was an ideal, which, like all ideals, could never be perfectly achieved.

The dichotomy between ideal and practice is an old one, and has been applied to any number of political, historical, and even artistic terms. Was the United States really a democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when slavery was legal and women were denied the franchise? Has there ever been a perfect democracy, even in fifth-century BC Athens? Is there even a definition of "democracy" that would apply to all states claiming such status? For that matter, are there universally accepted definitions of "freedom" or "class"? Obviously, to insist on the perfect implementation of political ideals would make all classifications impossible.

The totalitarian dictators did not in fact control every facet of their respective countries' existence. They were, however, free to reach major decisions without consulting or by ignoring the advice of other individuals or institutions. They were not bound by any laws or customs and were unlikely to be affected by appeals to conscience, sentiment, or pity. They were not even restrained by official ideology because they alone decided what the ideology *du jour* should be; they did not hesitate to reverse previously held ideological positions however much they might deny it.

In many ways, totalitarianism was a secularized religion complete with charismatic leaders, sacred books (with old and new testaments), prophets, martyrs, saints, disciples, heretics, hymns, ceremonies, processions, and concepts of heaven and hell. True believers claimed to

be in possession of the one revealed truth that could not be disputed on the basis of rational arguments. There were chosen people who belonged to the “right” class or race and nonbelievers and nonfavored groups who had to be eradicated from the righteous community by instruments of inquisition. The young were to be thoroughly indoctrinated in the new “religion” so that it would be perpetuated indefinitely. It is no wonder, therefore, that many traditional religious leaders soon realized that they were competing with the totalitarian leaders and parties for the very soul of the people.

Comparisons between democratic and totalitarian ideals help in the understanding of both. Surprisingly, there are some superficial similarities. Totalitarian regimes, like democracies, claimed to rule on behalf of the governed but were “unhindered” by the “divisiveness” of parliamentary states. Hitler and Mussolini (though not Stalin) also resembled democratic leaders in wanting to be photographed mingling with the “masses.” They had elections, or at least plebiscites (in the case of Nazi Germany). Both systems even had constitutions. The similarities, however, are far more apparent than real. Totalitarian regimes were ultra-paternalistic. They decided what was in the best interests of their citizens, not the citizens themselves, whose willingness or ability to do the right thing was very much in doubt. Elections consisted only of unopposed candidates selected by the totalitarian party. Constitutions, if not ignored (as in the case of Nazi Germany), existed to protect the government, not to insure the rights of individuals against the government, as in democracies. Most important, democracies are characterized by an optimistic philosophy of human nature; in the tradition of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and French enlightened philosophers, humans are thought to be by nature rational. As such they are capable of managing their own affairs with only minimal assistance from a government. Human progress for all nationalities, if not certain, is at least possible. Totalitarian philosophy, however, holds that humans are by nature either too irrational or too ignorant to be entrusted with self-government.

Another way of understanding twentieth-century totalitarian dictatorships is to compare them with their nontotalitarian predecessors. Arbitrary, authoritarian, and brutal forms of government, which

cancel all forms of literature and minimize individual rights, are as old as civilization itself. The first Napoleonic regime in the early nineteenth century also resembled the totalitarian dictatorships in its charismatic leadership. But these other forms of despotism depended on the tolerance of the army, church, or business interests. Moreover, they allowed considerable freedom of expression so long as it did not threaten the regime. Their leaders were often constrained by customs or a sense of responsibility to God. The totalitarian dictatorships were not satisfied with the mere absence of opposition; they demanded positive support, especially from the shapers of public opinion: journalists, teachers, authors, and artists. The lack of rapid and mass forms of communications, together with high illiteracy rates, made it impossible for pre-twentieth-century regimes to control their subjects physically and intellectually. Finally, as alluded to above, earlier dictatorships usually lacked the religious zeal and desire to completely transform society.

The totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century had at their disposal mass-circulation newspapers, mass-produced posters, telegraph machines, telephones, automobiles, railroads, airplanes, cinemas, radios (and more recently television sets), and mandatory-attendance state schools. Orders from dictators could be transmitted to the lowest government, party, and military officials instantly. No village was too remote to be outside the reach of the regime's instruments of propaganda.

Marxism – Leninism – Stalinism

Although most scholars believe that there were important common denominators between the regimes of Communist Russia, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany, none would argue that they were without major differences in their beliefs and practices.

The Soviet dictators – Lenin, Stalin, and their successors – like their fellow autocrats in Italy and Germany, claimed to follow an immutable and indeed scientific ideology. The works of the nineteenth-century German economic philosopher Karl Marx

were supposed to be the foundation of communist ideology. In reality, first Lenin and then Stalin changed Marx's ideas almost beyond recognition (see Plate 1). Marx, especially in his famous work *Das Kapital*, argued that a class struggle had existed throughout history and would soon produce an international revolution of industrial workers. However, he had no blueprint for the future communist utopia beyond his belief that the means of production would be owned in common, thus preventing any further exploitation of one class by another. Even Lenin, prior to his seizure of power in the fall of 1917, had no practical plans for postrevolutionary government beyond vague concepts, such as the nationalization of industries, large-scale and communal farming, and central economic planning.

Lenin and also Stalin inherited from Marx unverifiable beliefs about the behavior of various social groups, which were given the status of scientific laws and were hence beyond dispute or public opinion. They also inherited from the master an unscrupulous attitude toward anyone whom they perceived to be impeding the development and consolidation of the revolution.

Lenin, unlike Marx and his more orthodox followers in Russia who were known as Mensheviks, was unwilling to wait for the Industrial Revolution to follow its natural course in Russia, which was by far the most economically backward of the major European states at the beginning of the twentieth century. By promising to turn over confiscated noble lands to peasants, Lenin believed that he could at least gain the temporary support of peasants – for whom Marx had had nothing but contempt – and thus bring about an early revolution. Nor did he believe that the proletariat was capable of organizing any kind of revolution on its own. It needed instead to be led by a small group of dedicated professional revolutionaries over which he would exercise dictatorial control. The party worked for the interests of the proletariat whether the latter recognized it or not. Thus, Lenin quickly abandoned Marx's idea of majority rule. His creed was out of step with contemporary developments in Marxism in western Europe, but very much in the tradition of Russian authoritarianism and secret conspiracy. Lenin's drastic alteration of Marxism was to have ominous consequences for the future. Unlike the regimes of Italy and

Germany, which came to power by at least pseudo-constitutional means, in the Soviet Union the Communists were able to achieve power only through the use of force and were, with the partial exception of World War II, never certain of popular support.

Though intolerant of overt opposition, Lenin was at least willing to put up with discussions within the Bolshevik party, which he founded in 1903. Dissidents might be demoted, or even expelled from the party, but they were not killed. Stalin moved one step beyond Lenin. Under Stalin, meaningful discussion within what by then was called the Communist party soon came to an end. The use of terror was no longer confined to non-Communists, but was now also directed against those within the party itself.

Lenin and Stalin did resemble Marx in foreseeing a much greater role for the postrevolutionary state in the economic life of Russia than Mussolini in Italy or Hitler in Germany. To some degree they had little choice because the Russian bourgeoisie was so weak. Not only were all the factories and other means of industrial production owned by the state, but so too was all the agricultural land, which was cultivated in large collective farms. Uprooting 120 million peasants from their ancestral homes would require far more force than the relatively modest economic plans envisaged by Mussolini and Hitler. Indeed, it required a veritable civil war in which there were literally millions of casualties. It also required a bureaucracy and police apparatus far larger than those of the other two dictatorships. Excess was the very essence of what became Stalinism. At the height of the Stalinist terror in the 1930s, an estimated one in every eight Soviet men, women, and children was shot dead or sent to a labor camp, where many died.

Fascism and Nazism

Whereas the Soviet Communists saw their movement as an instrument of progress for all humanity, the Fascists and Nazis made little attempt to appeal to other nationalities, believing that alien races could never be assimilated. Superficially, the ideology of the Fascists in Italy was almost diametrically opposed to communism. In fact,

both Fascists and Nazis (often generically lumped together as “fascists” with a small f) made anticommunism or anti-Marxism (to include social democratic parties) a major part of their programs. Here, chronology is important. By the time the Fascist and Nazi parties were born in 1919, the Communists had already seized power in Russia, were engaged in a brutal civil war, and had attempted to carry their revolution deep into Poland.

Consequently, fascism in both Italy and Germany arose in an atmosphere of anticommunist hysteria. If the Communists were international in their outlook and appeal (though in practice they were frequently nationalistic), the fascists were militantly nationalistic. If the Communists favored the industrial working class and sought to destroy private property along with the middle and upper classes, the fascists (at least in Germany) called for a classless “people’s community” (in German, *Volksgemeinschaft*) and the protection of private property. If the Communists were outspoken atheists, the fascists, on the whole, pretended to be the defenders of Christianity. If Marxists, in theory, wished to emancipate women, fascists would protect them from the evils of politics and glorify their traditional role as homemakers and prolific mothers. Despite these apparently diametrically opposed views, however, the practices of communists and fascists turned out, in many cases, to be remarkably similar.

Fascism in both Italy and Germany was more than simply anticommunism. It was also passionately opposed to the liberal, democratic, parliamentary values of the Western democracies, which dated back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Fascists believed that such values had exalted the rights of individuals at the expense of the community. In the words of a Nazi slogan, *Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz* (“The common good comes before the good of the individual”). Although unwilling to go nearly as far as the communists in outlawing private property, fascists were equally intolerant of diversity and just as filled with hatred and resentment. Like the communists, they saw violence as unavoidable. The fascists promoted considerably more control of their economies than was acceptable in the West, at least prior to World War II. Capitalists

were allowed to prosper in the fascist states, but only if they cooperated with the aims of the political authorities.

The two fascist states, however, differed significantly from each other, as well as from Communist Russia and the democratic West. Mussolini was very much interested in pursuing old-fashioned colonialism in Africa and in creating a new, albeit smaller, Roman Empire around the Mediterranean in places like Albania, Greece, Tunisia, Nice, Malta, and Corsica. His glorification of warfare as an exalting and purifying experience found no echo in the Soviet Union and even went beyond the public pronouncements of Hitler, at least before World War II. In spite of his constant touting of the virtues of war, Mussolini was woefully inadequate in his preparations for combat. Hitler, for his part, professed a love of peace, until at least 1938, while accelerating the rearmament of Germany. Finally, fascism and Nazism differed sharply on the subject of race. Racism and anti-Semitism were not part of fascist ideology until 1938, and when they were finally introduced were unpopular with many Italians in spite of the many exceptions allowed by the law.

For Hitler, race was as central to an understanding of history as the class struggle was for Marxists. To him it was even more important than nationalism, although throughout the 1920s and 1930s he liked to pose as a traditional nationalist who wanted nothing more than to reunite all nearby ethnic Germans in his Third Reich. Hitler's philosophy borrowed heavily from nineteenth-century racists; he admitted a debt only to the anti-Semitic composer Richard Wagner. Hitler was anxious to show that his racist ideas were thoroughly grounded in German history but, unlike the Communists, neither he nor Mussolini claimed to have an infallible ideological founding father apart from themselves.

The Nazis believed that there was a definite racial hierarchy among humans: they and other "Nordics" (a term often used interchangeably with "Aryans") such as the Scandinavians, Dutch, and Anglo-Saxons of Britain and the United States, were at the top and represented the forces of good. Mediterranean people such as the Italians and French came next, followed by the Slavs (Russians, Poles, etc.), and finally Africans, gypsies, and Jews, who were definitely at

the bottom. The Jews, who for them represented the forces of darkness, differed from other “inferior races” because, far from being “lazy” or “stupid,” they were hardworking and diabolically clever in their business and professional practices. Worse, they were conspiring to take over the world and were therefore the mortal enemies of unsuspecting Aryans. Asians, particularly the Japanese, did not easily fit into the Nazis’ racial hierarchy. The problem was solved when Japan became a German ally, after which the Japanese were dubbed “honorary Aryans.”

Racism, as will become readily apparent in the pages that follow, was fundamental to both the domestic and foreign policies of Hitler’s Germany. It led directly to the discrimination against, and the segregation, deportation, and finally extermination of, the German Jewish population, and later to the slaughter of Jews in other European countries. It was also behind the Nazis’ euthanasia program which resulted in the murder of tens of thousands of other groups of “racial inferiors,” including the mentally ill, the physically handicapped, and homosexuals. Finally, it was racism that tempted Hitler to invade the Soviet Union because he became convinced that it was dominated by Jews, who he believed could not hope to build or run a state capable of stopping the German army.

Hitler’s expansionist plans were much more ambitious than Mussolini’s, although both dictators were influenced by nineteenth-century ideas about living space, or *Lebensraum*. Hitler was enormously impressed by the three great empires of his day, those of the British, the French, and the Americans. He feared both American power and cultural influence, but admired what he regarded as America’s ruthless conquest of a huge land mass replete with enormous natural resources, at the expense of its indigenous population, which was similar to the British colonization of Australia and New Zealand. Hitler’s “Wild West” was Ukraine in the east, an area he imagined Germans and other Nordic peoples would be willing to colonize. Ukraine seemed to be the perfect place to colonize because of its fertile soil, relatively low density of population (or so he imagined), and tolerable climate. Such an area, which was larger than Germany itself, would enable the Reich’s population to grow to 250 million in a

century; but this German and Germanized population would be economically independent. Ukraine would not necessarily have been Hitler's final conquest. He believed that a healthy population was one which was always increasing and which would continually require new land in order to grow its food. He had no confidence in Germany's ability to increase its agricultural productivity and would probably have been astonished to learn that even West Germany, prior to German reunification, had been able to provide most of its own agricultural needs with little more than half the territory of his Germany. In any event, for Hitler there were only two possibilities: limitless expansion or utter ruin.

It should be noted that Hitler's own racist and expansionist ideas were a form of contemporary Social Darwinism. Charles Darwin, a nineteenth-century English biologist, published his theory of natural selection, or biological evolution, *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859. According to Darwin, only those individuals of each species in the animal and plant kingdoms that had characteristics best suited to their environment would live long enough to reproduce and thereby pass those "successful" characteristics on to their offspring. Thus, only the fittest of each species would survive the struggle for existence. An English social scientist named Herbert Spencer extrapolated what Darwin had written and then applied a similar notion to human society, in which he saw individuals, nations, and even entire races all competing for survival. Spencer's social Darwinist ideas were at the height of their popularity when Hitler was growing up around the turn of the twentieth century, and they permeate his famous book *Mein Kampf*, which he wrote in the mid-1920s. Hitler interpreted the ideology of Social Darwinism literally, frequently assigning the same task to two people on the basis that the fitter of the two would perform the job better. At the end of his life he also reached the (for him) logical conclusion that the Slavic Russians, having defeated the Germans, must be racially superior and hence more fit to survive.

Some historians have regarded Nazi Germany as backward looking in contrast to Fascist Italy, which they view as forward looking. It is true that the Nazis had a soft spot for peasants and the simple rural life, and even attempted to create a back-to-the-farm movement.

They also hated modern music and art, and even frowned on some modern medical practices. By contrast, Mussolini was committed to modern architecture and technology, often bragging about his air force setting new speed records. The differences in outlook of the two regimes were, however, superficial and not unusual. A-back-to-the-farm movement also existed in the United States during the 1930s, and many Americans to this day tend to view life on farms and in small towns as being more virtuous than life in big cities. In any event, many historians have pointed out that Hitler's foreign policy could only be achieved by a modern, mechanized army, and not by peasants carrying pitchforks.

Neither Fascist Italy nor Nazi Germany can be easily categorized as either revolutionary or reactionary, traditional or modernistic, backward looking or forward looking. Both clearly contained all of these elements. Even Communist Russia cannot be easily pigeon-holed. Though it denounced everything about the tsars, it became profoundly conservative during and after the reign of Stalin.

The dictators of all three totalitarian states took their ideologies very seriously, even though they were willing to change them for tactical purposes whenever it suited their fancy. All three of them spoke of creating a new utopia based on national renewal and a single totalitarian party. Ironically, they enjoyed their greatest successes when they were not driven by ideological considerations, and they met their greatest catastrophes precisely at those times when they sought to put their most extreme ideological concepts into practice.