TOTALITARIANISM BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Born in Italy at the beginning of the 1920s, the concept of totalitarianism experienced an uninterrupted succession of metamorphoses and changes throughout the twentieth century, until its last rebirth after September 11, 2001, when it was remobilized in the struggle against Islamic terrorism. It is an astonishingly plastic, resilient, and inevitably ambiguous concept, insofar as it merges both politics and scholarship, and belongs, with a different meaning, to almost all currents of thought. Born in the political struggle, it shifted successfully to political theory in which, beyond their discrepancies, most of its interpreters defined it as a new form of power that exceeds the classical categories of political theory running from Aristotle to Max Weber—despotism, tyranny, dictatorship—and grounded in a combination of ideology and terror. The migration of this concept to the field of historical studies, however, was much more controversial. Useful in defining the nature and forms of political regimes, and eventually to establish their typology, "totalitarianism" becomes a problematic, limited, not to say useless concept for analyzing their origins, developments, and fall. On the one hand, it favors a selective historical comparison between different political regimes; on the other hand, it simply juxtaposes them, stressing some analogies but neglecting other fundamental dimensions of historical investigation (origins, duration, ideologies, and social basis). This article is a plea for critical use of this category, which implies both a rejection of its recurrent ideological uses and its integration with the achievements of social and cultural history.

Keywords: totalitarianism, historical comparison, fascism, communism, National Socialism, Holocaust, Islamic terrorism

The trajectory of the idea of totalitarianism throughout scholarship and, more broadly speaking, the political culture of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century has been tortuous, with alternating periods of widespread impact and moments of prolonged eclipse.[1] It is probably too early to say whether its entrance into our political and historical lexicon is irreversible, but it has proved to be remarkably resilient. It even experienced a recent, spectacular renewal after September 11, 2001, when it was remobilized against Islamic terrorism. Thus,

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1. The most important pieces of this intellectual debate are gathered in three readers: *Le totalitarisme: Le xxᵉ siècle en débat*, ed. Enzo Traverso (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2001); *Le totalitarisme: Origines d'un concept, genèse d'un débat 1930–1942*, ed. Bernard Bruneteau (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2010); *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Ein Bilanz der internationaler Forschung,* ed. Eckart Jesse (Baden Baden: Nomos Verlag 1996). For a historical survey of this concept until the end of the Cold War, see Abbott Glason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a first critical interpretation of this debate in the post-Cold War years, see Anson Rabinbach, "Moments of Totalitarianism," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006), 72-100.

"totalitarianism" is a significant example of a massive—even if not always fruit-ful—symbiosis between politics and scholarship, between a fighting word, if not a slogan, and an analytical tool.

Among the factors that explain this toughness and durability, public memory is certainly preeminent. On the one hand, the Holocaust has become an object of public commemorations, museums, literary and aesthetic fictionalizations—some scholars define it as a "civil religion" of the West—as well as a paradigm of contemporary violence and genocide. On the other hand, the fall of the USSR definitively inscribed the communist experience into a historical perspective, focusing almost exclusively on its criminal dimension (mass deportation, mass executions, concentration camps) and simultaneously eclipsing its previously exalted emancipatory potential. Rather than a prismatic, multifaceted, and contra-dictory phenomenon combining revolution and terror, liberation and oppression, social movements and political regimes, collective action and bureaucratic despo-tism, communism was reduced to the accomplishment of a murderous ideology. Stalinism became its "true" face. In such a context, the concept of totalitarianism appeared as the most appropriate in order to grasp the meaning of a century so deeply shaken by violence and mass extermination, whose icons are Auschwitz and Kolyma.

Before its defeated enemies, Western liberalism celebrated its final triumph. Originally formulated in Hegelian terms by Francis Fukuyama in 1989,[2] this self-satisfied interpretation is subjacent to many scholarly works of the turn of the century, from Martin Malia's *The Soviet Tragedy* to François Furet's *The Passing of an Illusion*.[3] A similar conflation of scholarship and political com-mitment shapes the most recent and impressively growing "totalitarian" wave devoted to Islamic terrorism, the new threat that challenges the West. The old conflict between "free world" and totalitarianism (fascist or communist) has been replaced by a "clash of civilizations" in which the latter takes a new face.

STAGES IN THE HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

The premises of the idea of totalitarianism emerged during the Great War, which, far before the advent of Hitler's and Stalin's regimes, was depicted as a "total war."[4] As a modern conflict belonging to the age of democracy and mass society, it had absorbed the material resources, mobilized the social and economic forces, and reshaped both mentalities and cultures of the European countries. Born as a classical inter-state war in which the rules of international law had to be applied,

2. For a critical reconstitution of this debate, see Perry Anderson, "The End of History," in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), 279-375.

3. Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994); François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth* Century [1995] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

4. *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), the third of a five-volume Cambridge University Press history of total war. On this controversial concept, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "'Absoluter' und 'totaler' Krieg: Von Clausewitz to Ludendorff," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 10, no. 2 (1969), 220-248, and Talbot Imlay, "Total War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 3 (2007), 547-570.

it quickly turned into a gigantic, industrial massacre. "Total war" opened the age of technological extermination and mass anonymous death; it produced the Armenian genocide—the first of the twentieth century—and prefigured the Holocaust, which could not be understood without this historical precedent of a continentally planned industrial killing.[5] Therefore, the Great War was a foundational experience: it forged a new warrior ethos in which the old ideals of heroism and chivalry merged with modern technology, nihilism became "rational," combat was conceived as a methodical destruction of the enemy, and the loss of enormous numbers of human lives could be foreseen or planned as strategic calculation. To a certain extent, the idea of totalitarianism was the outcome of a process of brutalization of politics that shaped the imagination of an entire generation.[6] Quickly, "total war" became the "total state." Moreover, the idea of totalitarianism belongs to a century in which, far beyond geopolitical interests and territorial pretentions, wars opposed irreconcilable values and ideologies. This time needed new concepts able to capture its spirit, and "totalitarianism" was one of the most successful among its neologisms.

Very few notions of our political and historical lexicon are as malleable, elastic, polymorphous, and, finally, ambiguous as "totalitarianism." It belongs to all currents of contemporary political thought, from fascism to antifascism, from Marxism to liberalism, from anarchism to conservatism. The adjective "totalitarian" (*totalitario*), forged in the early 1920s by Italian antifascists in order to depict the novelty of Mussolini's dictatorship, was later appropriated by fascists themselves. Whereas for Giovanni Amendola the fascist "totalitarian system" was a synonym for tyranny, fascism clearly tried to conceptualize—and sacralize—a new form of power. In a famous article written in 1932 for the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile claimed the "totalitarian" nature of their dictatorship: the abolition of any distinction between state and civil society and the birth of a new civilization embodied by a monolithic state.[7] Differently from many nationalists and "conservative revolutionaries" of the Weimar Republic who, from Ernst Jünger to Carl Schmitt, hoped for a "total mobilization" and a "total state" along the lines of Italian fascism, National Socialism eschewed this political concept.[8] According to Hitler and Josef Goebbels, rather than a "totalitarian state," the Nazi regime was a "racial state" (*völkische Staat*).[9]

5. On the symbiotic relationship between war and genocide, see *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

6. On the "brutalization of politics" engendered by total war, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memories of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 159-181; Omer Bartov, "The European Imagination in the Age of Total War," in *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 33-50.

7. Jens Petersen, "La nascita del concetto di 'stato totalitario' in Italia," *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico di Trento* 1 (1975), 143-168. This article was written by Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini but signed by the latter alone: Benito Mussolini, "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," *Political Quarterly* 4, no. 7 (1933), 341-356.

8. Ernst Jünger, "Total Mobilization" (1930), in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 119-138; Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* [1932], ed. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22-25.

9. See the transition from the "revolutionary conservative" vision of "total" to the Nazi idea of "racial" state in Ernst Forsthoff, *Der totale Staat* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1933).

In spite of a growing ideological convergence ratified in 1938 by the Italian anti-Semitic and racial legislation, some crucial differences remained between fascism and National Socialism, whose worldviews focused respectively on state and race (*Volk*).

During the 1930s, when it became a widespread concept among Italian and German antifascist exiles, the word "totalitarianism" appeared in the writings of some Soviet dissidents—notably Victor Serge[10]—and became instrumental in criticizing the common authoritarian features of fascism, National Socialism, and Stalinism. Catholic and Protestant exiled antifascists, classical-liberal thinkers, heretical Marxists, and semi-anarchist writers all depicted the new European dictatorships as "totalitarian." In 1939, the German–Soviet pact suddenly legitimized a concept whose status had been until that moment quite precarious and uncertain. In 1939 the first international symposium on totalitarianism took place in Philadelphia, gathering scholars from different disciplines, among whom a significant number were refugees.[11] It became quite common, at least until 1941 and the German aggression against the USSR, to depict communist Russia as "red fascism" and Nazi Germany as "brown Bolshevism."[12]

A synoptic outline of the history of "totalitarianism" can distinguish eight different moments: the birth of the concept in Italy in the 1920s; its spread in the 1930s among political exiles and the fascists themselves; its scholarly recognition in 1939, after the German–Soviet pact; the alliance between antifascism and anti-totalitarianism since 1941; the redefinition of antitotalitarianism as synonymous with anticommunism during the Cold War; the crisis and decline of the concept between the 1960s and the 1980s; its rebirth in the 1990s as a retrospective paradigm through which to conceptualize the past century; and finally, its remobilization after September 11, 2001, in the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism. This rough periodization reveals both the strength and the remarkable flexibility of a concept permanently mobilized against different and sometimes interchangeable targets. Across its different stages, it seizes the emergence of a new power that does not fit the traditional categories—absolutism, dictatorship, tyranny, despotism—elaborated by classical political thought from Aristotle to Max Weber, a power that does not correspond with the definition of "despotism"—an arbitrary rule, lawless and grounded on fear—which Montesquieu depicted in *The Spirit of the Laws* (II, ix-x). As Hannah Arendt put it, the twentieth century produced a symbiosis of ideology and terror.

During the Second World War, the axis of this debate shifted from Europe to the United States, following the lines of a massive transatlantic migration of cultures, knowledge, and people. Viewed through the prism of intellectual history, it became an ideological controversy among exiles. Before being affected by geopolitical worries and eventually imprisoned within the compelling boundaries

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10. In a letter to his French friends Magdeleine and Maurice Paz dated February 1, 1933, Serge defined the USSR "an absolute, castocratic [*castocratique*] totalitarian state." See Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), 326.

11. Carlton J. Hayes edited the works of this conference in a special issue of *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 82 (1940).

12. Franz Borkenau, *The Totalitarian Enemy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).

of Western foreign policy, it expressed the vitality of a politically committed scholarship, expelled from its original environment and settled in a new world, in which it discovered American institutions and political cultures. Especially for the Jewish-German émigrés—the core of this *Wissentransfer* from the opposite coast of the Atlantic Ocean—defining totalitarianism meant confronting and assimilating a culture of freedom that appeared to them as fresh and strong as the American democracy discovered by Tocqueville a century earlier. Exiled historian George L. Mosse captured this cultural and existential shift through a striking formula: from *Bildung* to the Bill of Rights.[13] Salvaged through a modern Exodus, these refugee scholars thought totalitarianism was in the middle of a historical catastrophe, between the apocalyptic shipwreck of Europe and the disclosure of a new world. It is in the postwar years that the end of the alliance between antifascism and antitotalitarianism confronted them with new moral and political dilemmas.

In fact, the first seven stages of this debate could be gathered in two main moments: the time of the birth and diffusion of the concept (1925–1945) and the time of its apogee and decline in the West (1950–1990), when it lost its previous consensual status. During the first period, its predominant function was *critical*, inasmuch as it was instrumental in criticizing Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. During the second period, it mostly fulfilled an *apologetic* function: the defense of the "free world" threatened by communism. In other words, totalitarianism became synonymous with communism, and antitotalitarianism simply meant anticommunism. In the Federal Republic of Germany, where it became the philosophical base of the *Grundgesetz*, a veil of oblivion fell on the Nazi crimes, removed as an obstacle to "reworking the past" (*Verarbeitung der Vergangenheit*).[14] In the name of the struggle against totalitarianism, the "free world" supported violent military dictatorships in both Asia (from South Korea to Indonesia and Vietnam) and Latin America (from Guatemala to Chile). During these decades, the alliance established in the 1930s between antifascism and the "free world" was broken and the word "totalitarianism" itself was banned from the culture of the left. Only a few heretics like Herbert Marcuse in the United States and the small circle of French anti-Stalinist socialists gathered around the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Jean-François Lyotard)[15] persisted in claiming their antitotalitarianism. Therefore, "totalitarianism" became above all an English-American word, quite neglected in continental Europe except for West Germany, a geopolitical outpost of the Cold War. In France and Italy, where the communist parties had played a hegemonic role in the Resistance, some crucial pieces of this debate, like Hannah Arendt's

13. George L. Mosse, "The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America," in *The German-Jewish Legacy in America 1933–1988: From* Bildung *to the Bill of Rights,* ed. Abraham Peck (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 13-16.

14. See Wolfgang Wippermann, *Totalitarismustheorien* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1997), 45.

15. On the antitotalitarian journal *Socialisme et Barbarie*, created in 1947 by Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, see Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (London: Berghahn Books, 2004), notably the first chapter, 27-88; Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Pape*rs, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1998).

or Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski's works, were ignored or even not translated. The diffusion of this concept lay above all in a network of journals linked to the Congress for Cultural Freedom (*Encounter, Der Monat, Preuves, Tempo Presente*, and so on), which was quickly dissolved in 1968, after the revelation of its financial links with the CIA.[16] During the late 1960s and 1970s, the years of youth rebellion and the campaigns against the Vietnam War, it declined even in Germany and the US, where it appeared irremediably contaminated by anticommunist propaganda. When Herbert Marcuse pronounced this word during a lecture at the Free University of Berlin, Rudy Dutschke reproached him for "adopting the language of the enemy."[17]

SHIFTING FROM POLITICAL THEORY TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

Hegemonic in the postwar years among American and German scholars, the totalitarian interpretation of fascism and communism since the 1970s was increasingly contested and finally abandoned by a new generation of social and political historians who depicted themselves as "revisionist."[18] To many of them, it appeared epistemologically narrow, politically ambiguous, and, in the last analysis, useless. Different from political theory, which is interested in defining the nature and typology of power, historical research deals with the origins, development, global dynamic, and final outcome of political regimes, discovering major differences between Nazism and Stalinism that inevitably put into question any attempt to gather them into a single category.

Historians widely ignored a book like Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which powerfully contributed to diffusing it in scholarship and the public debate. Arendt devoted many illuminating pages to analyzing the birth of stateless people, first at the end of the Great War with the fall of the old multinational empires, and then with the promulgation in many European countries of anti-Semitic laws that transformed the Jews into pariahs. In her view, the existence of a mass of human beings deprived of citizenship was a fundamental premise for the Holocaust. Before setting into motion the gas chambers, she wrote, the Nazis had understood that no country would claim the Jewish refugees: "The point is that a condition of complete rightlessness was created before the right to live was challenged."[19] Similarly, she suggested a historical continuity between colonialism and National Socialism, pointing out their ideological and material filiation. Imperial rule in Africa had been the laboratory of a fusion between administration and massacre that totalitarian violence achieved

16. On the history of this institution, see Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind in Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989); and Gilles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and Post-War American Hegemony* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

17. See William David Jones, *German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 192-197.

18. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Revisionism in Soviet History," *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007), 77-91.

19. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951] (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 296.

some decades later. Bewildered by the heterogeneity of a book divided into three sections—anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism—not coherently connected with one another, historians preferred ignoring it, until it was rescued four decades later by postcolonial studies.[20]

But historians' indifference or avoidance mostly resulted from the compelling character of a totalitarian model that appeared to them so general as to become almost useless. In *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), a canonical book for two generations of political scientists, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out many incontestable affinities between National Socialism and communism, defining totalitarianism as a "systemic correlation" of the following features: a) the suppression of both democracy and the rule of law, meaning here constitutional liberties, pluralism, and division of powers; b) the instauration of single-party rule led by a charismatic leader; c) the establishment of an official ideology through the state monopoly of media, until the creation of ministries of propaganda; d) the transformation of violence into a form of government through a system of concentration camps directed against political enemies and groups excluded from the national community; e) the free market replaced by a planned economy.[21]

All these features are easily detectable to different degrees in both Soviet communism and German National Socialism, but the picture that emerges from their account is static, formal, and superficial: totalitarianism is an abstract model. Its total control of both society and individuals is more reminiscent of literary fantasies—from Aldous Huxley to George Orwell—than of the real fascist and communist regimes. Since the war years, some exiled scholars reversed the view of the Third Reich as a monolithic Leviathan—which basically was a Nazi self-representation—and Franz Neumann provocatively depicted it as a Behemoth: "a non-state, a chaos, a rule of lawlessness, disorder, and anarchy."[22] In the 1970s, some historians of the German functionalist school analyzed Nazism as a "polycratic" system grounded on different centers of power—the Nazi party, the army, the economic elites, and the state bureaucracy—united by a charismatic leader that Hans Mommsen did not hesitate to call a "weak dictator."[23]

20. See, for instance, Dirk Moses, "Hannah Arendt, Colonialism, and the Holocaust," in *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, ed. Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 72-90; Pascal Grosse, "From Colonialism to National Socialism to Postcolonialism: Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006), 35-52; Michael Rothberg, "At the Limits of Eurocentrism: Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 33-65.

21. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), particularly chapter 2, "The General Characteristics of Totalitarianism," 15-26.

22. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944* [1942] (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), xii. Almost simultaneously, another exiled scholar pointed out the anomic character of Nazi Germany related to a context of international civil war: Sigmund Neumann, *Permanent Revolution: The Total State in a World at War* (New York: Harper, 1942).

23. Elaborated by Neumann in *Behemoth*, the "polycratic" model inspired the scholarship on National Socialism of the historians of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte, notably Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich* [1969] (New York: Routledge 2013). On this historiographical current and Hans Mommsen's definition of

A diachronic comparison of Nazi Germany and the USSR shows significant differences. First of all, their duration: one lasted only twelve years, from 1933 to 1945, and the other more than seventy years. The former experienced a cumulative radicalization until its collapse, in an apocalyptic atmosphere, at the end of a world war it had sought and provoked. The latter emerged from a revolution and survived the death of Stalin, which was followed by a long post-totalitarian age; it was an internal crisis and not a military defeat that put it down. Second, their ideologies could not be more antipodal. Hitler's Third Reich defended a racist worldview grounded on a hybrid synthesis of counter-Enlightenment (*Gegenaufklärung*) and the cult of modern technology, a synthesis of Teutonic mythologies and biological nationalism.[24] As for real socialism, it expressed a scholastic, dogmatic, and clerical version of Marxism, claimed as an authentic inheritor of the Enlightenment and as a universalist, emancipatory philosophy. Finally, Hitler came to power legally in 1933, when Hindenburg nominated him chancellor—some observers qualified this choice as "miscalculation"[25]—with the approval of all traditional elites, both economic (big industry, finance, landed aristocracy) and military, not to mention a large section of the nationalist intelligentsia. Soviet power, on the contrary, came from a revolution that had completely overthrown the czarist regime, expropriated the old rulers, and radically transformed the social and economic bases of the country, both nationalizing the economy and creating a new managerial layer.[26]

Whereas totalitarian scholarship focused on political homologies and the psychological affinities of tyrants, "revisionist" historians emphasized the enormous differences between Mussolini's or Hitler's charisma and the cult of personality in Stalin's USSR. The "aura" that surrounded the bodies and words of the fascist leaders fit quite well the Weberian definition of charismatic power: they appeared as "providential men" who needed an almost physical contact with their followers; their speeches possessed a magnetic strength and created a community of believers around them. Of course, propaganda exacerbated this tendency, which nonetheless remained one of the matrices of their regimes. They should prefigure the fascist "New Man" not only through their ideas, values, and decisions, but also by their bodies, their voices, and their behaviors.[27] Stalin's charisma was different. He never merged with the Soviet people, which viewed him as a distant silhouette on the stage of Red Square during the Soviet parades. Its aura was a purely artificial construction. He neither created Bolshevism nor led the October

Hitler as a "weak" dictator, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* [1989] (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), notably chapter 4, 81-108.

24. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chapter 8, 189-216.

25. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 424-425.

26. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

27. In the introduction to his monumental biography of Hitler, Kershaw recognizes his debt to the Weberian conception of charismatic leadership, "a notion which looks to explanations of this extraordinary form of political domination primarily in the perceivers of 'charisma,' that is, in the society rather than, in the first instance, in the personality of the object of their adulation" (Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936*, xii). As for Mussolini's charisma, see the first three chapters of Sergio Luzzatto, *The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini's Corpse and the Fortunes of Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005).

Revolution but arose from the party's internal struggles after the Russian Civil War. Some historians point out the "afar" character of his personal power, which was much more distant and much less emotional or corporeal than that of his fascist counterparts.[28]

COMPARING TOTALITARIAN VIOLENCE

Violence was obviously another crux of the totalitarian model. Stalinist violence was essentially *internal* to Soviet society, which it tried to submit, normalize, discipline, but also transform with coercive means. The overwhelming majority of its victims were Soviet citizens, most of them Russians, and this holds for the victims of political purges (activists, civil servants, party functionaries, and military officers) as well as for those of social repression and forced collectivization (deported kulaks, criminal and "asocial" people). The national communities punished because of their supposed collaboration with the enemy during the Second World War—Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and others—were small minorities with respect to the whole of Stalinism's victims. Nazi violence, on the contrary, was mostly *external*, that is, projected outside of the Third Reich. After the "synchronization" (*Gleichschaltung*) of society—an intense repression directed primarily against the left and the trade unions—it raged during the war. Relatively soft within a national community "racially" circumscribed and controlled by a pervasive police, it unfolded limitlessly toward some categories excluded from the *Volk* (Jews, Gypsies, the disabled, homosexuals) and was finally extended to the Slavic populations of the conquered territories, the war prisoners and the antifascists deported, whose treatment varied according to a clear racial hierarchy (the conditions of the British inmates were incomparably better than those of the Soviet ones).

Before being elucidated with tremendous empirical evidence by historical scholarship, these cleavages were mentioned in the 1950s in the writings of several political thinkers. Raymond Aron, one of the rare French analysts who did not reject the notion of totalitarianism, indicated the differences between Nazism and Stalinism by emphasizing their final outcomes: forced labor camps in USSR and gas chambers in the Third Reich.[29] Stalin's social project of modernizing the USSR through industrial five-year plans and the collectivization of agriculture certainly was not irrational in itself. The means employed to achieve these goals, nevertheless, were not only authoritarian and inhuman but also, in the last analysis, economically ineffective. Forced labor in the Gulags, the "military and feudal exploitation of the peasantry," and the elimination of a significant section of the military elite during the purges of 1936–1938 had catastrophic results (collapse of agricultural production, famine, population drop) and put into

28. According to Moshe Lewin, the cult of Stalin was exactly the opposite of Weberian charisma, insofar as, at the height of his power, the Russian dictator "was hidden from his followers, and kept people around him under the threat of death." Moshe Lewin, "Stalin in the Mirror of the Other," in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 108-109.

29. See Raymond Aron, *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 298.

question the project of modernization itself.[30] Most striking in Nazism, instead, is precisely the contradiction between the rationality of its procedures and the irrationality (human, social, and even economic) of its goals: the reorganization of Germany and continental Europe along the lines of racial hierarchies.[31] In other words, Nazism combined "instrumental reason" with the most radical form of irrationalism inherited from the counter-Enlightenment. In the extermination camps—an eloquent illustration of this reactionary modernism—the methods of industrial production and scientific management were employed for killing. During the war, the extermination of the Jews became irrational even on a military and economic level, insofar as it was implemented by eliminating a potential labor force and drained resources for the war effort. As Arno J. Mayer put it, the Holocaust was shaped by a permanent tension between economic "rational" concerns and ideological imperatives that ultimately prevailed.[32] The most recent scholarship proved the attempt by the Nazi leadership to ground these extermination policies on economic rational bases—which clarifies some aspects of the Holocaust—but this objective was put into question and finally compromised during the war.[33] In the USSR, the Gulag inmates (*zeks*) were exploited for colonizing Siberian territories, deforesting regions, building railroads, power plants, industries, and creating new cities. There, brutal slavery methods were employed for "building socialism," that is, for laying the basis of modernity.[34] According to Stephen Kotkin, the distinctiveness of Stalinism did not lie in "the formation of a mammoth state by means of the destruction of society," but rather "in the

30. See the conclusions of Nicolas Werth, "A State against its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union," in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, ed. Stéphane Courtois (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 261-268 (the expression between quotation marks belongs to Nikolai Bukharin). On the collectivization of Soviet agriculture, see Andrea Graziosi, *The Great Soviet Peasant War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

31. For a complete analysis of the Nazi project to reshape German society along racial lines, see Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

32. See Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The "Final Solution" in History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 331. The death camps functioned exclusively as sites of extermination, but they were contradictorily submitted to the authority of the WVHA, the Economic-Administrative Main Office. Raul Hilberg mentions this "dilemma" as "an entirely intra-SS affair": Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 557.

33. See Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Race War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), and Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). An interesting criticism of the thesis of the economic rationality of the Holocaust, focused on Aly's previous works, still remains Dan Diner, "On Rationality and Rationalization: An Economistic Explanation of the Final Solution," in *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 138-159.

34. According to Anne Applebaum, "it was strange, but true: in Kolyma, as in Komi, the Gulag was slowly bringing 'civilization'—if that is what it can be called—to the remote wilderness. Roads were being built where there had been only forest; houses were appearing in the swamps. Native peoples were being pushed aside to make way for cities, factories, and railways." See Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 89-90. For Mayer, the Gulag fulfilled "a dual function: to serve as an instrument of enforcement terror; and to serve as an economic resource of unfree labor": Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 640.

creation, along with such a state, of a new society."[35] In Nazi Germany, the most advanced accomplishments of science, technology, and industry were mobilized for destroying human lives.

Sonia Combe sketched an illuminating comparison between two figures that embodied Nazi and Stalinist violence: Sergei Evstignev, the master of Ozerlag, a Siberian Gulag near Lake Baikal, and Rudolf Höss, the more famous commander of Auschwitz.[36] Interviewed at the beginning of the 1990s, Evstignev did not hide a certain pride in his accomplishments. His job consisted in "re-educating" the inmates and, above all, in building a railroad, the "track." In order to fulfill this goal, he could exploit the labor force of the deported, sparing or "consuming" it according to his own exigencies. The survival or death of the *zeks* depended on his choices, which in the last analysis were fixed by the central Soviet authorities: thousands of prisoners died working as slaves under terrible conditions for building the "track." In Ozerlag, death was a consequence of climate and forced labor. Evstignev evaluated the efficiency of Ozerlag by calculating how many miles of railway had been built every month.

Rudolf Höss led instead a network of concentration camps whose core was Auschwitz-Birkenau, a center of industrial extermination. The basic criterion for calculating the "productivity" of this establishment was the number of dead, which rose or dropped according to the efficiency of both transportation and technology. In Auschwitz, death was not a byproduct of forced labor, it was the purpose of the camp. Interviewed by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* (1985), SS Franz Suchomel depicted it as "a factory" and Treblinka as "a primitive but efficient production line of death."[37] Starting from this statement, Zygmunt Bauman analyzed the Holocaust as a good illustration of "a textbook of scientific management."[38]

Of course, no reasonable observer could deny that both Nazism and Stalinism implemented murderous policies, but their internal logic was deeply different, and this incongruity put into question a concept like totalitarianism, which is focused exclusively on their similarities. This explains the skepticism of so many historians, from those of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte, who tried to analyze the German society behind the monolithic façade of the Nazi regime, to the most recent biographers of Hitler and almost all historians of the Holocaust.[39] In the field of Soviet studies, the last significant works of the "totalitarian" school appeared in the 1990s, when it had been marginalized by its "revisionist" critics. The last important work devoted to the comparison between Nazism and

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35. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2.

36. Sonia Combe, "Evstignev, roi d'Ozerlag," in *Ozerlag 1937–1964*, ed. Alain Brossat (Paris: Editions Autrement, 1991), 214-227.

37. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 52. See also the memorial written by Rudolf Höss in 1946, before his execution: *Commandant of Auschwitz* (New York: Orion, 2000).

38. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 150.

39. See, in particular, Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

Stalinism, gathering the contributions of many Western and Russian scholars, is significantly titled *Beyond Totalitarianism*.[40]

<p style="text-align:center">HISTORICAL PATTERNS</p>

A potential virtue of the concept of totalitarianism lies in favoring historical comparisons, but its political constraints reduce them to a binary and synchronic parallelism: Nazi Germany and the USSR in the 1930s and 1940s. A diachronic and multidirectional comparison would open instead new interesting perspectives. Stalinism and Nazism did not lack forerunners and competitors.

For Isaac Deutscher, Stalin was a hybrid synthesis of Bolshevism and Czarism, just as Napoleon had embodied both the revolutionary wave of 1789 and the absolutism of Louis XIV.[41] In a similar way, Mayer depicts Stalin as a "radical modernizer" and his rule as "an uneven and unstable amalgam of monumental achievements and monstrous crimes."[42] As for the deportation of the kulaks during the agricultural collectivization of the 1930s, Peter Holquist suggests it fundamentally repeated the resettlement of more than 700,000 peasants in the 1860s, at the time of the reforms of Alexander II, inscribed in a broader project of Russification of the Caucasus area.[43]

The "liquidation of the kulaks" was the result of a "revolution from above" that was conceived and realized with authoritarian and bureaucratic methods, far more improvised than rigorously planned (with uncontrolled consequences). Rather than Auschwitz or the Barbarossa Operation, the Soviet collectivization is reminiscent of the great famine that decimated the Irish population in the middle of the nineteenth century,[44] or the Bengali famine of 1943. As several scholarly works convincingly proved, even if the death of civilians was not the purpose of Bengali military operations, it was accepted as necessary and marginal "collateral damage," as in Ukraine in 1930–33. And even Stalin's scorn for the Russian peasantry was eclipsed by Churchill's racist views on the Indian subjects of the British Empire.[45] But the conventional "totalitarian" approach does not allow any comparison with the Allied violence insofar as it came from "antitotalitarian" actors.

Nazism too had its historical predecessors. Reducing it to a reaction or defensive violence against Bolshevism means ignoring its historical premises, both cultural and material, in nineteenth-century European racism and imperialism. German anti-Semitism was much older than the Russian Revolution, and the concept of "vital space" (*Lebensraum*) appeared at the turn of the twentieth

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40. *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

41. Isaac Deutscher, "Two Revolutions" (1950), in *Marxism, Wars, and Revolution: Essays from Four Decades* (London: Verso, 1984), 35.

42. Mayer, *The Furies*, 607.

43. Peter Holquist, "La question de la violence," in *Le siècle des communismes*, ed. Michel Dreyfus (Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2000), 126-127.

44. Mayer, *The Furies*, 639.

45. See Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

century as the German version of an imperialist idea that was widespread across the old continent. It simply reflected a Western vision of the non-European world as a space open to conquest and colonization.[46] The idea of the "extinction" of the "lower races" belonged to the entire European culture, particularly British and French. Born from the defeat of 1918, the collapse of the Prussian Empire, and the "punishment" inflicted on Germany by the Versailles Treaty, Nazism transferred the old colonial ambitions of pan-Germanism from Africa to Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, British India still remained a model for Hitler, who conceived and planned the war against the USSR as a colonial war of conquest and pillage. Rather than Bolshevism, it is the extermination of the Herero, perpetrated in 1904 in South-Western Africa (today Namibia) by the troops of General von Trotha, that prefigured the "Final Solution" for both its language (*Vernichtung, Untermenschentum*) and its proceeding (famine, camps, deportation, systematic annihilation). The "logic and factual *prius*" of the Holocaust, one could say paraphrasing Ernst Nolte, should be sought in German colonial history.[47] Outside Germany, the closest experience of genocide before the Holocaust was the fascist colonization of Ethiopia in 1935, carried on as a war against "lower races," with chemical weapons and mass destruction, including a huge campaign of "counter-insurgency" against the Abyssinian guerrilla warfare that announced the Nazi *Partisanenkampf* in the USSR.[48] This further suggests that the almost exclusive focus in totalitarian scholarship on the interaction between National Socialism and Bolshevism implicitly disregards its relationship with Italian fascism. Karl Dietrich Bracher, one of the most radical defenders of the idea of totalitarianism, simply refused to inscribe Nazism into a European fascist family.[49] Distinguishing between a "right-wing" (German) and a "left-wing" (Italian) totalitarianism, rooted respectively in the *völkisch* ideology and the tradition of Sorelian socialism, Renzo De Felice similarly denied any degree of kinship between Hitler and Mussolini: fascism, he concluded in apologetic terms, remained outside the "shadow cone" of the Holocaust.[50] Other historians have pointed out the totalitarian character of fascism—according to Emilio Gentile, it would even be the most accomplished form of totalitarianism, because of its emphasis on statehood—but generally avoid any comparison with Nazi violence.[51]

46. See Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 47-75. For a synoptic view of Nazi imperialism, see Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

47. See Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstsein: Realität, Deutung, und Verarbeitung des deutsches Kolonialkrieg in Namibia 1904 bis 1907* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1999).

48. See Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War 1935–1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

49. Karl Diegrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

50. See the interview of Renzo De Felice by Giuliano Ferrara in *Il fascismo e gli storici oggi*, ed. Jader Jacobelli (Roma: Laterza, 1987), 6.

51. Emilio Gentile defines fascism as "the most complete rationalization of the totalitarian state," in *Storia e interpretazione del fascismo* (Rome: Laterza, 2002), 272. See also Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo: Il partito e lo stato nel regime fascista* (Roma: Carocci, 2008), and *Modernità totalitaria: Il fascismo italiano*, ed. Emilio Gentile (Rome: Laterza, 2006).

COMPARING IDEOLOGIES

The pillar of the totalitarian model of scholarship remains ideology. Reduced to a system of power grounded on ideology—what Waldemar Gurian called "ideocracy"[52]—it offers a purely *negative* definition: totalitarianism as antiliberalism. This is the only way to gather fascism and communism into a single category. But adopting this "ideocratic" model, scholarship turns into genealogy, sketching different origins of twentieth-century political wickedness. The most conservative scholars—for instance, Eric Voegelin—saw totalitarianism as the epilogue of secularization, a process that started with Reformation and finally resulted in a world deprived of any religiosity: "the journey's end of the Gnostic search for a civil theology."[53] The sharpest controversy divides those who seek the source of evil in the authoritarian potentialities of the Enlightenment from those for whom fascism completed the trajectory of the counter-Enlightenment. Thus, Isaiah Berlin depicted Rousseau as "one of the most sinister and formidable enemies of liberty in modern thought,"[54] and Zeev Sternhell sees fascism as a radical attempt at destroying the "French-Kantian" tradition of rationalism, universalism, and humanism.[55] Other scholars emphasize the convergence of antidemocratic tendencies coming from both the radical Enlightenment and ethnic nationalism, suggesting multiple, intermingled genealogies. For Jacob Talmon, left-wing antiliberalism (radical democracy embodied by Rousseau, Robespierre, and Babeuf) and right irrationalism (racial mythologies from Fichte to Hitler) merged in totalitarianism, a monster whose two heads—communist and fascist—were equally holistic and messianic, therefore opposed to empirical and pluralistic liberalism.[56] In *The Road to Serfdom*, Friedrich von Hayek saw the essence of totalitarianism in the planned economy and pointed out its premises in the socialist criticism of private property, the core of modern freedom, which would have contaminated radical nationalism after the Great War before finally producing National Socialism.[57]

Beyond these genealogical and philosophical discrepancies, the question remains whether ideology suffices as a satisfactory interpretation of Nazi and Stalinist violence. For the adherents of the totalitarian model, this conclusion is

52. Waldemar Gurian, "Totalitarianism as Political Religion," in *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,* ed. Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 123.

53. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* [1952] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 163.

54. Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 49. At the same time, Berlin also detected the origins of totalitarianism in Joseph de Maistre's apology for the executioner: "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 130.

55. Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

56. Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* [1952] (New York: Norton, 1970).

57. Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* [1944] (London: Routledge, 2007).

self-evident.[58] Stressing a clear continuity from Jacobinism to Bolshevism, which produced similar forms of mass violence, Richard Pipes explains that "terror was rooted in the Jacobin ideas of Lenin," whose ultimate goal was the physical extermination of the bourgeoisie, an objective logically inscribed in his "doctrine of the class war" and "congenial to his emotional attitude to surrounding reality."[59] In his eyes, the Committee of Public Safety of 1793 derived from the *sociétés de pensée* of the French Enlightenment just as the Cheka was an outcome of the Populist circles of the czarist era, from which the Bolsheviks inherited their terrorist views. Malia depicts communism as the accomplishment of a pernicious form of utopianism: "In the world created by the October Revolution, we are never facing a *society*, but only a *regime*, an 'ideocratic' regime."[60] The common feature of these interpretations lies in reducing both the French and the Russian Revolutions to eruptions of fanaticism. Pipes compares the revolution to a "virus."[61] As for Furet, he suggested that the Gulag was included in the Terror of the French Revolution because of their identical undertakings. "Through the general will," he argued, "the people-as-king achieved a mythical identity with power," a belief that was "the matrix of totalitarianism."[62] From the *Historikerstreit*, the German controversy between Jürgen Habermas and Ernst Nolte in 1986,[63] to *The Black Book of Communism* (1997), the French bestseller edited by Stéphane Courtois,[64] the thesis of a substantial identity between Nazism and Bolshevism, the former resulting in "racial genocide" and the latter in "class genocide," as epiphenomena of equivalent ideological essences continues to be very popular but appears quite old-fashioned in scholarship, which has abandoned it in favor of more nuanced and multi-causal approaches.

The Holocaust is an eloquent test of this change of historiographical paradigm. For several decades, scholars have been divided between two main currents that Saul Friedländer distinguished as *intentionalism* and *functionalism*: the first focused mostly on the ideological impulses, the second on the unexpected character of the extermination of the Jews, resulting from a whole series of pragmatic

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58. Until the opening of the Soviet archives, which induced scholarship to revise very significantly the number of the victims of Stalin's Terror, the most widespread work inspired by this totalitarian model of ideologically planned mass killing was Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purges of the Thirties* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). For a balance sheet of this debate, see Nicolas Werth, "Repenser la 'Grande Terreur,'" in *La terreur et le désarroi: Staline et son système* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), 264-299.

59. Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 790, 794, 345.

60. Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 8. As debatable is the "ideocratic" interpretation of totalitarianism suggested by A. James Gregor, according to whom both Mussolini's fascism and Lenin's Bolshevism would be, in the last analysis, simple variants of Marxism: A. James Gregor, *Marxism, Fascism, and Totalitarianism: Chapters in the Intellectual History of Radicalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

61. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, 132-133.

62. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 180.

63. On the *Historikerstreit*, see *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), and Richard Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

64. On *The Black Book of Communism*, see Enzo Traverso, "The New Anti-Communism: Rereading the Twentieth Century," in *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism*, ed. Mike Haynes and Jim Wolfreys (London: Verso, 2007), 138-155.

choices made within sudden circumstances.[65] For *intentionalist* historians, the Second World War simply created a historical constellation that enabled the accomplishment of a project as old as anti-Semitism. For the *functionalists*, the hatred of the Jews was a necessary but insufficient premise of an event that was engendered in the middle of war.[66] Many recent works tried to overcome this outdated quarrel by adopting a larger approach to Nazi violence that extracts the event itself from the narrow framework of Holocaust studies. Thus, ideology appears embedded in a broader and syncretic geopolitical project: a colonial plan to conquer the German "vital space" and destroy the USSR, a Bolshevik state that the Nazis identified with the Jews. Territorial conquest, the destruction of communism, food shortages and the famine of the Slavic population, German settlements, pillaging of natural resources, and the extermination of the Jews: all these goals merged into a war whose meaning could be synthesized as a gigantic biological and political reorganization of Europe.

As Timothy Snyder suggests, *Mein Kampf* was built on a Christian paradigm—paradise, fall, exodus, redemption—and resulted in an "amalgamation of religious and zoological ideas," but this tendency to interpret history and society through a biological prism was typical of nineteenth-century positivism, shaping all currents of thought from nationalism to socialism. Hitlerism remained a radical version of *völkisch* nationalism, and its ideological peculiarities were the product of multiple symbioses that transformed it, as Snyder, agreeing with Saul Friedländer, puts it, into "a meeting point of German Christianity, neo-romanticism, the mystical cult of sacred Aryan blood, and ultra-conservative nationalism."[67] This amalgamation of social Darwinism, eugenics, and mythical and counter-Enlightenment thought produced a singular form of "redemptive anti-Semitism"—the extermination of the Jews as a form of German emancipation—without comparison in other European countries. This peculiar synthesis, however, was only a *premise* of Nazi violence. According to Friedländer, the Holocaust was neither the ineluctable outcome of the rise to power of Hitler—the implementation of a pre-established plan—nor the random product of a "cumulative radicalization" of miscalculated policies. It was rather the "result of converging factors, of the interaction between intentions and contingencies, between discernible causes and chance. General ideological objectives and tactical policy

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65. Saul Friedländer, "Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism," in *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 64-83.

66. The most striking examples of these antipodal approaches are, for the intentionalist current, the works of Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), and the highly controversial Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997), which extends the intention from Hitler to the entire German people; for the functionalist current, two articles by Martin Broszat, "Hitler and the Genesis of the 'Final Solution,'" in *Aspects of the Third Reich*, ed. H. W. Koch (London: Macmillan, 1985), 390-429, and Hans Mommsen, "The Realization of the Unthinkable: The 'Final Solution' of the Jewish Question in the Third Reich," in *From Weimar to Auschwitz: Essays on German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 224-253. Today, the most significant representative of the funtionalist school is Götz Aly, *"Final Solution": Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London: Arnold, 1999), and the already mentioned *Hitler's Beneficiaries*.

67. Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 4.

decisions enhanced one another and always remained open to more radical moves as circumstances changed."[68]

According to Snyder, Operation Barbarossa revealed a fatal miscalculation by both Hitler and Stalin. The latter did not have any illusion about the provisory character of his alliance with the German dictator, but did not expect aggression so soon and did not believe the warnings he received during the spring from numerous sources, attributing them instead to British propaganda. His passivity brought the USSR to the verge of collapse. As for Hitler, he remained prisoner of his vision of the Slavs as an "inferior race" and mistakenly thought it possible to destroy the USSR in three months: the failure of the German offensive determined the final outcome of the conflict. Launching their Blitzkrieg, the Nazis had four fundamental goals: the fast annihilation of the USSR; a planned famine that should have affected 30 million people during the winter of 1941; a vast program of German colonization of the Western territories of the defeated USSR (*Ostplan*); and the "Final Solution" of the Jewish Question, that is, the mass transfer of the European Jews to the farthest areas of the occupied territories, where they would be progressively eliminated. The failure of this Blitzkrieg pushed Hitler to change his priorities: the "Final Solution," initially foreseen to be accomplished at the end of the war, suddenly became an immediate goal, insofar as it was the only one possible to carry out in the short term. Since they could not be evacuated, the Jews were killed, whereas the occupied countries were systematically destroyed. Thus, Snyder argues, "the killing was less a sign of than a substitute for triumph."[69] His interpretation avoids many commonplaces of "totalitarian" scholarship. He sees Hitler and Stalin as historical actors whose endeavors and purposes have to be critically understood far beyond their cruelty, to avoid reducing them to metaphors of evil. Their ideologies shared almost nothing, and even their extermination policies were deeply different: National Socialism killed mostly non-Germans almost exclusively during the war; Stalinism killed predominantly Soviet citizens before the war years.

Similarly, many scholars combine intentionalist and functionalist approaches in analyzing the different waves of Soviet violence. The first took place in the middle of a civil war, between 1918 and 1921, with the excesses, summary executions, and crimes of all civil wars. It was certainly shaped by a Bolshevik vision of violence as "midwife" of history, but did not arise from a project of "class extermination." At its origins, Bolshevism shared the culture of other European social democracies: until 1914, Lenin considered himself a faithful disciple of Karl Kautsky, the "pope" of German Marxism, and his ideological orientation did not differ from that of many Russian and European socialists who would strongly criticize the October Revolution. The second and third waves, the collectivization of agriculture and the Moscow Trials respectively, took place in a pacified and stabilized country. Rather than from an ideologically grounded plan of extermination, they arose from an authoritarian and bureaucratic project of social modernization

68. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1933–1939: The Years of Persecution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 5.

69. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 215.

that, as John Arch Getty put it, turned into an "erratic" and "miscalculated" policy whose final consequence was the establishment of terror as a permanent practice of power.[70] Instead of theorizing a linear continuity from Lenin to Gorbachev and explaining Stalinist terror as an expression of the "ideocratic" character of the USSR, it would probably be more pertinent to contextualize it, and to consider ideology as just one of its impulses among others. In short, the "ideocracy" model irresistibly tends toward *teleology*, positing a linear continuity from a virtual to an actual totalitarian evil. According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, "totalitarian-model scholarship"—the USSR as a "top-down entity," a monolithic party grounded on ideology and ruling by terror over a passive society—"was in effect a mirror image of the Soviet self-representation, but with the moral signs reversed (instead of the party being always right, it was always wrong)."[71]

ISLAMIC GHOSTS

Since September 11, 2001, a new chapter has begun in the history of this intellectual debate. Whereas the end of real socialism had deprived liberal democracy of the enemy against which it usually displayed its moral and political virtues, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington suddenly reactivated the old antitotalitarian paraphernalia, directing it against the new threat of Islamic fundamentalism. As during the Cold War, a new army of crusaders quickly appeared, many of them "renegades" from the left, like Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens, Bernard-Henry Lévy, and others.[72] In 2003, at the moment of the American invasion of Iraq, Berman depicted a religious movement like Al Qaida and a secular regime like Saddam Hussein's Baath as two forms of totalitarianism, equally inspired by "a cult of cruelty and death."[73] Adam Michnick, the famous Polish dissident of Solidarnosc and director of the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, summarized the meaning of this new campaign in defense of the West:

I remember my nation's experience with totalitarian dictatorship. This is why I was able to draw the right conclusions from Sept. 11, 2001. . . . Just as the great Moscow trials showed the world the essence of the Stalinist system; just as "Kristallnacht" exposed the hidden truth of Hitler's Nazism, watching the collapse of the World Trade Center towers made me realize that the world was facing a new totalitarian challenge. Violence, fanaticism, and lies were challenging democratic values.[74]

70. John Arch Getty, "The Policy of Repression Revisited," in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. John Arch Getty and Roberta Manning (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 62. Mayer draws similar conclusions: "There is nothing to suggest that the Gulag was conceived and operated with an autogenocidal or ethnocidal fury. The vast majority of inmates—probably over 90 percent—were adult males between the ages of twenty and sixty. There were relatively few children, women, and aged in the camps" (Mayer, *The Furies*, 643).

71. Fitzpatrick, "Revisionism in Soviet History," 80.

72. See, for instance, *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics*, ed. Simon Cottee (New York: New York University Press, 2008); for a critical assessment of this new antitotalitarian campaign, see Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso, 2008). The liberal intellectuals of this new antitotalitarian wave irresistibly resemble in several respects their Cold War forerunners, well depicted by Isaac Deutscher, "The Ex-Communist's Conscience" (1950), in *Marxism, Wars, and Revolutions*, 49-59.

73. Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 2004), xiv.

74. Adam Michnick, "We, the Traitors," *World Press Review* 50, no. 6 (2003). Originally from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 28, 2003. http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/1086.cfm (accessed September 4, 2017).

Adopting this general belief, many scholars applied to Islam the analytical categories forged for interpreting the history of twentieth-century Europe. With this epistemic transfer, a movement like the Muslim Brotherhood has become a sort of Leninist "vanguard party," equipped with many organizational and ideological tools of European totalitarianism. Its inspiration, the Egyptian theologian Sayyid Qutb, was depicted as the ideologist of "a monolithic state ruled by a single party," and oriented toward a form of "Leninism in Islamic dress."[75] According to Jeffrey M. Bale, Islamic doctrines are "intrinsically anti-democratic and totalitarian ideologies," insofar as they reproduce in a religious form all typical features of secular Western totalitarianism: Manicheism, monism (notably utopian collectivism), and paranoia, systematically aiming at dehumanizing and destroying their enemies.[76] Curiously, Saudi Arabia, the Islamic regime that is the closest to the totalitarian model, is rarely mentioned by the new Western crusaders. But different from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia is an ally of the West, occupying an economic and geopolitical position that automatically excludes it from the axis of evil.

Fitting Islamic terrorism into the totalitarian model is not an easy task. Unlike European fascism, which was born as a reaction against democracy, it emerged from a historical, continuous lack of democracy. In many Muslim countries, it embodied a protest against reactionary and authoritarian regimes supported by the US and the former colonial powers, thus achieving, paradoxically, a moral legitimacy.[77] It struggles against the West, which usually appears in the Arabic countries under imperial and authoritarian rather than democratic forms. In the Middle East, where the Western "humanitarian wars" have killed several hundred thousand people, most of them civilians, since 1991, explaining that they are antitotalitarian struggles for freedom and democracy is a difficult task, as unconvincing as it was for the Latin Americans in the 1970s to believe that the military dictatorships of Pinochet and Videla were protecting them from communist totalitarianism. Unlike the years of the Cold War, when the West could appear as a "free world" in the eyes of the dissidents of the Soviet satellites, today the US appears as an imperial power to most Islamic countries.

Furthermore, ISIS violence is qualitatively different from that of classic totalitarianism, which implied the state monopoly of the means of coercion. In spite of its endemic character, Islamic terrorism arises within weak states, coming from their fragmentation and nonfulfillment. Historically speaking, terrorist violence has always been antipodal to state violence, and in this respect al-Qaida or even ISIS are not exceptions. In recent years, ISIS has assumed an almost state existence, as a territorial and institution-like entity, benefiting from ten years of Western military interventions that destabilized the entire Middle East, which helped it to extend its influence and create many terrorist units where

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75. Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, "Terror, Islam, and Democracy," in *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 286-287.

76. Jeffrey M. Bale, "Islamism and Totalitarianism," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 2 (2009), 80, 84.

77. See Faisal Devji, *Landscape of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

they never existed before. But other differences are also significant. Fascism and communism were projected toward the future, wished to build new societies and create a "New Man"; they did not want to restore old forms of absolutism.[78] Mussolini and Goebbels explained that their national "revolutions" had nothing to do with legitimism. The reactionary modernism of Islamic terrorism, on the contrary, employs modern technologies like rockets, bombs, cellphones, and websites in order to return to the original purity of a mythical Islam. If it has utopian tendencies, they look to the past rather than to the future. Finally, Islamic fundamentalism does not fit the definition of "political religion" usually applied to totalitarianism. This concept designates secular movements and regimes that replaced traditional religions, adopting their own liturgies and symbols and asking their disciples to "believe" instead of acting according to rational choices. Inversely, Islamic terrorism is a violent reaction against the process of secularization and modernization that shaped the Muslim world after its decolonization. Instead of a secular religion, it is a *politicized* religion, a jihad against secularism and political modernity. Speaking of a "theocratic" totalitarianism makes this concept even more flexible and ambiguous than ever, once again confirming its essential function: not critically interpreting history and the world, but rather fighting an enemy.

CONCLUSION

Slavoj Žižek sarcastically depicted totalitarianism as an "ideological antioxidant" similar to the "Celestial Seasonings" green tea that, according to its advertisement, "neutralizes harmful molecules in the body known as free radicals."[79] Historically, "totalitarianism" played this role of a generic antibiotic healing the body of liberal democracy: stigmatizing its totalitarian enemies, the West absolved its own forms of imperial violence and oppression. Yet in spite of such persistent scholarly criticism, the concept of totalitarianism did not disappear, showing rather an astonishing strength and capacity for renewal, until extending its influence to new fields. Totalitarianism—this is its paradox—is both useless and irreplaceable. It is irreplaceable for political theory, which defines the nature and forms of power, and useless for historical research, which tries to reconstitute and analyze a past made of concrete and multifaceted events. Franz Neumann defined it as a Weberian "ideal type," an abstract model that does not exist in reality.[80]

As an ideal type, it is reminiscent much more of the nightmare described by George Orwell in *1984*, with its Big Brother, its Ministry of Truth, and its Newspeak, than real fascism and communism. Totalitarianism is an abstract idea, whereas historical reality is a concrete *totality*. A similar debate exists for

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78. This difference has been emphasized by Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), xiv. See also Rabinbach, "Moments of Totalitarianism," 84.

79. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 1-2.

80. Franz Neumann, "Notes on the Theory of Dictatorship," in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1957), 119.

other concepts that historical scholarship has imported from other disciplines, above all the notion of genocide. Born in the field of criminal law, it aims at designating guilt and innocence, inflicting punishment, recognizing suffering, and obtaining reparation; but its shift into the realm of historical studies introduced a compelling dichotomy that impoverishes the picture of the past. Perpetrators and victims are never alone; they are surrounded by a multiplicity of actors and move in a changing landscape; they *become* perpetrators and victims through a complex interaction of elements both ancient and new, inherited and invented, which shape their motives, behaviors, and reactions. Scholars try to explain this complexity; as Marc Bloch already suggested, they don't administer the tribunal of History. This is why many have decided to dismiss this category. According to Henry Huttenbach, "too often has the accusation of genocide been made simply for the emotional effect or to make a political point with the result that the number of events claimed to be genocides rapidly increased to the point that the term lost its original meaning."[81] For good or bad reasons, this concept condenses moral and political concerns that inevitably affect its use and entail prudence. Observing this permanent interference between memory claims and interpretive controversies, Jacques Sémelin suggests containing "genocide" within its proper identity—juridical and memory realms—privileging other concepts like "mass violence" in scholarship.[82]

This can be healthy caution, but should not be understood as the claim of an illusory "scientific," neutral, and value-free scholarship. It should rather make us aware that history is written in the middle of a force field differently affected by memory, politics, and law, in which the elucidation of the past cannot be separated from the public use of history. Does it mean that a Chinese Wall separates concepts from reality? If scholars of fascism and communism will probably keep their critical distance toward "totalitarianism," preferring other, less all-embracing but more nuanced and appropriate definitions, our historical consciousness needs reference points. We look at the past for understanding our present, and this means a "public use" of history.[83] Thus, if the concept of totalitarianism will continue to be criticized for its ambiguities, weaknesses, and abuses, it probably will not be abandoned. Beyond being a Western banner, it stores the memory of a century that experienced Auschwitz and Kolyma, the death camps of Nazism, the Stalinist Gulags, and Pol Pot's killing fields. There lies its legitimacy, which does not need any academic recognition. The twentieth century experienced the shipwreck of *politics*, which, according to Hannah Arendt, signifies a space open to conflict, to pluralism of ideas and human practices, and to otherness. Politics, she wrote, is not a question of ontology; it designates the *infra*, the interaction

81. Henry Huttenbach, "Locating the Holocaust under the Genocide Spectrum: Toward a Methodology and a Characterization," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3, no. 3 (1988), 297.

82. Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 320.

83. Jürgen Habermas, "Concerning the Public Use of History," *New German Critique* 44 (1988), 40-50. Among the inexhaustible literature on the difficult relationship between history and memory of mass violence, whose intersection is located precisely in the public sphere, it is worth mentioning the essays of Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

between human beings, between different subjects. Totalitarianism eliminates this public sphere, compacting human beings into a closed, homogeneous, and monolithic entity. It destroys civil society by absorbing and suffocating it into the state (from this point of view, it is antipodal to Marx's communism, in which the state disappears into a self-emancipated community). The concept of totalitarianism inscribes this traumatic experience into our collective memory and our representation of the past.

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