Is Totalitarianism still a valid political concept for characterising Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany?

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Totalitarianism debate

Although the majority of those studying Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia hold to the sociologist Michael Mann's view that 'the two regimes belong together. It is only a question of finding the right family name'[1], there is a great deal of debate on whether 'totalitarianism' should be that name. Immediately after the Second World War, political theorists and historians sought to categorise the regimes of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany in similar terms, viewing them as different in nature from other illiberal structures of government. Theorists such as Hannah Arendt[2], Karl Popper in 'The Open Society and its enemies' and Carl Friedrich in 'Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy' proposed that these two regimes should be labelled as 'totalitarian' and not merely as authoritarian dictatorships. However, in the last 20 years, there has been a shift in academic opinion as many historians, such as Ian Kershaw[3], believe that 'totalitarianism' fails to describe or explain historical reality. Indeed, Kershaw writes critically that the 'fundamental problem with the term "totalitarianism"… is that it has little or no explanatory power'[4]. Others such as Abbot Gleason claim that term 'totalitarianism' only came into popular usage as a product of the Cold War because it allowed the West to present communists, in a hostile fashion, as fundamentally similar to the Nazis they had previously fought[5]. The present debate on the utility of totalitarianism for classifying the two regimes is effectively captured by Michael Geyer as one between 'a more theoretical or a more empirical' stance[6]. He comments that, at present, academic thought on the matter is in a 'posttheoretical and

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[1] M. Mann, "The contradictions of Continuous Revolution" in *Nazism and Stalinism: Dictatorships in Comparison,* edited by Moshe Lewin and Ian Kershaw, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.135

[2] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Schocken Books, 1951

[3] Ian Kershaw strongly criticises totalitarianism in *Totalitarianism Revisited: Nazism and Stalinism in Comparative Perspective* and *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (Chapter 2)

[4] I. Kershaw, "'Working Towards the Führer': Reflections on the nature of the Hitler Dictatorship" in Stalinism and Nazism: *Dictatorships in Comparison,* edited by Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin Cambridge University Press, 1997

[5] A. Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War,* Oxford University Press, 1995, p.1

[6] M. Geyer, "After Totalitarianism-Stalinism and Nazism Compared" in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared,* edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.9

posttotalitarian [sic] mode' because 'time and again historians have come away disenchanted from the concept [of totalitarianism] because it proved unhelpful in… organising political findings'[7].

In order to assess whether totalitarianism is still valid as a means of characterising Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, it must first be established whether it is a distinctive political concept and what is involved in totalitarian ideals and methods. Since criticism of the term 'totalitarianism' is based in large measure on it not being able to capture accurately the historical details of the two regimes, I shall investigate this key problem and its impact on the debate. While, it is clear that neither regime fully achieved a totalitarian state, I shall argue that it does not follow that totalitarianism has no use as a tool of political analysis. My hypothesis is that the differences between the totalitarian model and the reality of the two regimes result from inconsistencies within totalitarianism itself, not from its inability to classify the two regimes adequately. It would then follow that the contemporary debate between empirical historians and political theorists, such as Arendt, is misconceived. The evidence used by historians to undermine the validity of the concept of totalitarianism for characterising these two regimes is consistent with the contradictory nature of totalitarianism. Indeed, I shall argue that the reality they describe is the direct consequence of the self-limiting and inconsistent nature of totalitarianism itself.

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Chapter 2

Totalitarianism: A distinct political structure?

If there is to be any genuine debate about totalitarianism, the term 'totalitarian' must mark out a discrete political phenomenon. Otherwise, the debate is misconceived and should be reconceptualised in other terms. A key problem in the current debate arises from a lack of clear characterisation of totalitarianism. While many discussions, such as Arendt's and Popper's, contain interesting analyses of the nature of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, their conditions and ideology, which they label as 'totalitarian', they fail to characterise satisfactorily what totalitarianism is. Indeed one major weakness in most work in this area is that the concept is taken for granted without proper definition or rigorous analysis. Arendt, in particular, simply assumes that both were totalitarian and then explains and analyses them as such. The editors of *Totalitarianism as a Historical Phenomenon* highlighted this problem when commenting that while "totalitarianism" was 'intensively used' and 'claims

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the status of chief explanatory model of our past', 'nobody knew what the term meant'[8]. Although it is a widely accepted and employed concept, it is not clear whether there is agreement in meaning between different authors or whether they are utilising the concept in different ways.

Totalitarianism, if a separate phenomenon, needs to be distinguished from other undemocratic and illiberal political structures, such as absolutist, dictatorial or authoritarian ones, which would not be described intuitively as totalitarian. For example, feudal monarchies, such as that of Louis XIV, would generally be labelled as absolutist but not as totalitarian. Similarly, military dictators, such as the Greek Junta in the 1970s or General Musharraf in Pakistan in recent years, are examples of dictatorships that would not be regarded as totalitarian. Authoritarian regimes may appear closer, but the generals now controlling Burma and the apartheid regime in South Africa, would not generally be characterised as totalitarian. Even though these distinctions are widely regarded as clear on an intuitive level, it does not necessarily follow that 'totalitarianism' marks out a distinctive political ideology and concept. It may be that the term is used loosely to categorise absolutist, dictatorial or authoritarian regimes which are found to be particularly abhorrent. Indeed, some have rejected totalitarianism as a valid concept, regarding it as 'contaminated by... Cold War exploitation'[9]. The presence of this clear political motive, in the Cold War, calls into question the validity of the widely accepted, distinction between totalitarian and merely authoritarian regimes

My hypothesis is that totalitarianism is a distinctive political structure because unlike authoritarianism, absolutism and dictatorship, it contains not only a method of political control but also an ideal-directed element[10]. It is widely believed that to be an ideology, a system of beliefs must contain a critique of society, a utopian vision for a new society and an explanation of how this change can be brought about[11]. Totalitarianism has these features in some measure. It presents a route from current society to the utopian ideal through programmes of centralisation, increasing the unchecked power of the leader and the use of terror. It offers a partial critique of existing forms of political structure as inadequate means of state control and contains a partial utopian view of society in which totalitarian control is achieved. However, since there can be various forms of a state employing totalitarian means, depending on other political values such as nationalism or extreme equality, it is not a complete ideology in its own right but merely one aspect of some other wider ideology. It is noteworthy, that totalitarian theorists, such as Mussolini,

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[8] A.A Kara-Murza and A. K. Voskresenskii. *Totalitarizim kak istoricheskii.* 1989, in M. Geyer, op.cit., p.12

[9] M. Geyer, op.cit., p.8

[10] I am indebted to Professor Michael Freeden for his comments and advice in this area

[11] A. Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction,* Palgrave Macmillan, 1992, p.11-2

labelled themselves primarily as fascist or national socialist, in reference to their wider ideological goals and not as totalitarians. As a result, while it would be incorrect to claim that totalitarianism itself is a complete ideology in the same way that conservatism and liberalism are, it contains certain idealised goals, which distinguish it from other illiberal political structures   .

Totalitarianism is closest to authoritarianism in that both aim at control of the population through whatever means are necessary to maintain power. They differ in that totalitarian governments seek to control completely all aspects of their population's lives in order to remove any thought or desire for opposition. In an ideal totalitarian state there would be no disagreement between the population and the rulers as everyone would have exactly the same goals and beliefs, as portrayed in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. By contrast, an authoritarian government would aim to contain and suppress actual opposition, without the goal of controlling the 'totality' of people's attitudes. However, even if this is condition is not achieved, regimes may aim to be totalitarian by seeking to gain total control. Authoritarian regimes, even if they employ similar methods, would be doing so merely to maintain power, not with the aim of radically changing the attitudes of the citizens. Thus, they can be clearly separated as totalitarianism involves a political, ideal-directed element as well as a method of control, whereas authoritarianism is simply a method for sustaining political power. Dictatorship differs in a similar way as it merely involves the continued rule of one person, regardless of their political motives. While all totalitarian rulers are authoritarian and dictatorial, not all authoritarian dictators are totalitarian.

The distinctions between totalitarianism and absolutism are clear. Absolutist rulers have completely unchecked power without any institutional counterbalances. The perspective of an absolutist ruler is encapsulated in Louis XIV's famous dictum 'l'état c'est moi' (the state, it is me). While totalitarianism may incorporate leaders and governments in the absolutist style, a merely absolutist ruler would not aim to control every aspect of their citizens' lives. Furthermore, as Michael Mann argues, absolutist monarchs of the past generally ruled according to the law and basic customs of their subjects[12]. A regime with totalitarian ideal-directed goals and methods, by contrast, would seek to remove the traditional constraints on the leader's power arising from laws and customs.

The fundamental difference between totalitarianism and these other illiberal forms of government is that the former has an ideal based political goal, which can be incorporated into a wider ideology. By contrast, the other three forms of government are merely means to the end of maintaining political power and running an effective state without concern for any further ideal orientated goal.

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[12] M. Mann, op cit. p 136

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Chapter 3

The Totalitarian Ideal and Method

While it is clear that totalitarianism differs from other forms of illiberal and undemocratic organisation, it needs to be characterised in more positive terms in order to assess its validity as a method of classifying Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. Totalitarianism, as has been noted, is both a method of controlling a state and its population and an ideal which can be part of wider, and differing, political ideologies.

The ideal based element in totalitarianism can be found as a shared feature in regimes which differ greatly in other aspects of social and economic thinking. It has several major facets. First, it challenges and seeks to undermine the classical liberal distinction, emphasised by John Stuart Mill in '*On Liberty*', between the public and private spheres of life. As an ideal, totalitarianism seeks to bring the state and its apparatus of control into many aspects of private life, such as the family and religion, seeking to mould people's interests and cultural pursuits. This is emphasised by Heywood who highlights 'the obliteration of "public" and "private" existence' as a key feature: 'the good of the collective body (nation or race) is placed above the good of the individual'[13]. This aspect of ideology can be shared by regimes which differ fundamentally on the political spectrum. The second feature is the complete ideological loyalty to the cause they represent,) refusing 'to tolerate opposing ideas and rival beliefs'[14]. Those adhering to totalitarian ideals would believe that even entertaining private reservations about the policy of the regime would betray the cause to which they are committed. As Heywood notes, totalitarian regimes encourage the 'monistic belief in a single value system and a single source of truth'[15] or ideological monism. The third feature is a belief in the 'unmediated relationship between leader and his people'[16], encouraging the view that the leader is an infallible guide, who, if followed, will lead the state to success. This ideal involves every citizen feeling 'directly confronted with the will of the leader'[17]. It is also the basis for the "cult of the personality" which is central to totalitarian regimes. Arendt describes this uniquely totalitarian phenomenon as the 'Leader

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[13] A. Heywood, op.cit., p.216

[14] Ibid., p.10

[15] Ibid., p.217

[16] Ibid., p.217

[17] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.526

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principle', encapsulated in the idea that 'the will of the Führer [leader] is the supreme law'[18] and the absence of 'reliable intervening levels' of authority between the leader and the ruled[19]. A final important ideal based feature of totalitarianism is extreme statism as underlined by Gentile's phrase 'everything for the state; nothing against the state; nothing outside the state'[20]. This idea finds expression in the view that 'the state is the most appropriate means of resolving problems and guaranteeing economic and social development' (Heywood, 216).

There are three main distinguishing features of totalitarian control. It involves the replacement of the state apparatus with that of the ruling party in an attempt to achieve, what Brown describes as 'the monopoly of power of the... party'[21]. In Western democracies political power is distributed between the ruling party and the state, with its own independent judiciary, army and civil service. By contrast, in a totalitarian regime, power is centralised as the party assumes the roles and positions of the state culminating in its complete dominance. In a totalitarian state the party controls its own military force, appoints and controls its own civil service and heavily influences and directs the judiciary[22]. In addition, totalitarian methods involve the continuous changing of the laws of the state, often in unpredictable and seemingly contradictory ways, at the whim of the dictator. In totalitarian states, many citizens would not be sure whether actions that had been legal for many years had suddenly, and without warning, become illegal[23]. The final, and most distinctive, feature of totalitarian control is the use of terror, not merely the threat of violence, to coerce and drive citizens into conforming and actively forwarding the policy of the government. Terror involves state sanctioned and legally "justified" violence and repression in a situation where the secret police are believed to exercise surveillance and possess knowledge of the population akin to that described in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* Totalitarian governments use terror not only to intimidate opposition but also to push all individuals into positively embracing and furthering the cause of the government in an attempt to 'abolish all significant autonomy lying within civil society'[24]. In a society where terror is effectively used, citizens will fear that unless they actively support the regime in all aspects of their life, they will be discovered and face extreme consequences. Terror is a far

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[18] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.478

[19] Ibid., p.525

[20] Gentile, in Heywood, op.cit., p. 217

[21] A. Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism,* Vintage Books, 2009, p.105

[22] Ibid., p. 106

[23] Emphasised by Professor Michael Freeden in private discussion

[24] M. Mann, op.cit., p.137

more effective method of control than the simple threat of violence against those who challenge the government's authority.

A key underlying feature, common to both the totalitarian ideal and the totalitarian method of control, is centralisation of power and values in the hands of the leader. This centralisation of power allows the decisions of the leader to reach and influence the people without checks or mediation from other institutions with their own political agenda or values. Power is centralised in an absolute sense, requiring the removal or subordination of alternative power bases such as the judicial system, religious institutions, independent government agencies and the army. This feature is, as we shall see, is central to the debate on the validity of totalitarianism for characterising Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Of all the defining features of totalitarianism, centralisation is the one that was in reality least effectively implemented by the two regimes. Their failure to centralise has led empirical historians, such as Kershaw, to question the value of the concept of totalitarianism for classifying Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia

An ideal totalitarian state is, in my view, one in which the ideological goals of the government incorporate totalitarian control and in which totalitarian methods are carried out with complete effectiveness. However, as with many ideals, it may be impossible to achieve fully. Nevertheless, regimes could be classified as embracing the ideal of totalitarianism and using totalitarian methods in so far as they aim to bring about a totalitarian state and are consistently taking steps towards that goal. In a similar fashion regimes might be characterised as liberal or socialist even if they have, in reality, failed to implement these ideals fully.

On the basis of this theoretical understanding of totalitarianism, I shall now seek to assess the fundamental issue underlying the debate about the validity of the concept of totalitarianism for characterising Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. The precise questions to be addressed are: To what extent did the two regimes fail to centralise power? Does their failure to do so undermine their claim to be totalitarian? In the next section, I shall focus chiefly on the issue of centralisation as this is, in my view, the crux of the "totalitarianism debate".

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Chapter 4

The Problems in Totalitarianism

'Many…have stressed the peculiar "shapelessness" of the totalitarian government'

Franz Neumann in *Behemoth* page 521, cited by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* p.514

The empirical historians were correct in identifying centralisation as a major problem for the claim that Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia were totalitarian regimes. The existence of multiple power structures, in what Ernst Fraenkel called a 'dual state'[25], generated a form of 'polycracy' containing 'anarchic competing fiefdoms'[26], which prevented effective centralisation occurring. Indeed Trevor Roper went so far as to describe the Nazi regime as a 'confusion of private empires' much like a feudal court[27].

The existence of competing power structures constitutes one key structural similarity between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. In Russia, Stalin established a number of parallel governmental structures, including the Communist Party, the NKVD (secret police), the state governing cabinet (sovnarkom) and the army, each with separate departments for politics, education and culture, the military and the economy[28]. Indeed, Brown comments 'every ministry as well as every military unit and branch of the political police also had its primary party organisation'[29], highlighting the level of duplication particularly between the apparatus of the party and the state. The number and complexity of these structures increased as Stalin established new layers of bureaucracy, each limiting the power of existing institutions. This policy led Arendt to comment that 'the Soviet regime relies even more [than the Nazi one] on constant creation of new offices to put former centres of power in the shadow'[30]. As the number of these organisations grew, the duplication of executive powers led to competition between differing power structures, each vying to be pre-eminent. There was a considerable amount of suspicion within and between these organisations, shown by the NKVD's willingness to create multiple departments each spying on others, such as the "the special department" acting as 'an

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[25] E. Fraenkel, *The Dual State: Law and Justice in National Socialism*, New York, 1941

[26] M. Mann, op.cit., p.137

[27] H. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler*

[28] *Russian Purge and the Execution of Confession*, 1951, in H. Arendt op.cit., p.523

[29] A. Brown, op.cit., p.106

[30] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.523

NKVD within the NKVD'[31]. Each organisation, and the individuals and sub divisions within them, were constantly seeking to increase their influence by winning more of Stalin's favour. The resultant shifts in power and influence can be seen in continuing internal purges, such as those of the NKVD chiefs: first Yagoda, then Yezhov by their successors. These competing features have led some to challenge the validity of totalitarianism for characterising the two regimes, with Gorliziki and Mommsen commenting that 'the soviet political order was never a smoothly functioning "machine" as it has been portrayed in some versions of the totalitarian model'[32]. Indeed, Thomas Masaryk went so far as to say 'the so-called Bolshevik system has never been anything but a complete absence of system'[33].

In Germany, there were similar competing parallel structures and individuals, including the Reich Ministry, the SA and later the SS and the Nazi Party with 'duality… repeated on every level'[34]. Many of these bodies had no official state or party role but were 'independent power bases which derived their authority directly from Hitler'[35]. The importance of this feature is emphasised by Kershaw when he describes the 'undermining of rational structures of government' and the 'proliferation of chaotic "polycratic" agencies'[36]. This view is further supported by Evans, who remarks that the 'Third Reich was left with a mass of competing institutions across the board'[37]. A vivid example of this is that the Nazi Party had four competing organisations for foreign affairs: the old Weimar Foreign Affairs Office, a Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Party as well as an SS agency and the Ribentropp Bureau[38]. Each of these potential governmental bodies and their respective leaders, Himmler, Bormann, Goebbels and Speer, were all competing to gain favour with Hitler and to be seen as his main executive representative. These conflicts are exemplified by Goebbels campaigning for the dismissal of Frick[39] and his attempt, aided by Speer, to

[31] *Russian Purge and the Execution of Confession*, 1951, in H. Arendt op.cit., p.523

[32] Y. Gorlizki and H. Mommsen, "The Political (Dis)Orders of Stalinism and National Socialism" in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared,* edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.84

[33] Cited by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 514

[34] R.J. Evans (a), *The Third Reich in Power*, Penguin, 2006, p.47

[35] Y. Gorliziki and H. Mommsen, op.cit., p.53

[36] I. Kershaw, op.cit., p.100

[37] R.J. Evans (a), op.cit., p.47

[38] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.515-6

[39] R.J. Evans (b), *The Third Reich at War,* Penguin, 2009, p. 511

'seize control of the Home Front' from the Committee of Three, consisting of Lammers, Bormann and Keitel[40]. The existence of these competing structures, each interpreting Hitler's 'vision' in their own distinctive way, generated a wide range of sometimes inconsistent policies as when some leading Nazis, such as Rosenberg, continued to debate the policy towards the conquered peoples of Eastern Europe even after their extermination had already been decided[41]. The overall result led Goebbels to complain in his diary "everybody does and leaves undone what he pleases because there's no strong authority here"[42]. Indeed, Evans remarks of the Nazi state that its 'sheer irrationality undermines any attempt to portray it as a system at all'[43].

These complex and competing power structures constitute one significant similarity between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. However, this important feature, as the empirical historians have emphasised, challenges the validity of regarding either as totalitarian. The political structures of these regimes gave rise to a form of pluralism of political power, in direct contradiction to the monism emphasised by the totalitarian ideal. Whatever the aims of the leaders, it proved impossible for them to exert 'unmediated' or total control over the population without any systematic control over all the organs of government. No fully totalitarian state could incorporate competing executive agencies for two reasons. First, the very existence of competing policies is inconsistent with successful totalitarian ideals because it undermines the centralised state and its ability to break effectively the public/ private distinction. Second, the existence of competing organisations challenges the possibility of instituting the ideological monism, characteristic of the totalitarian ideal because of the multiple interpretations, perspectives and agendas of the varying institutional players.

In addition to these similarities, the differences between the structures of the two regimes provide further evidence of their failure to achieve the totalitarian ideal. As Kershaw convincingly argues, the position of the leaders in the two states differed considerably. Stalin rose to power with a system of government already established by Lenin following Marxist principles, while Hitler created his own Nazi structure based around the role of the Führer himself[44]. Stalin emerged as a leading bureaucrat within the existing party framework, holding such positions as Commissar for Races and General Secretary of the Communist Party, slowly building his power base *within* the party. Hitler, by

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[40] Ibid., p.425

[41] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.520

[42] Goebbels on 2nd March, 1943, in R.J. Evans (b), op.cit.,p. 511

[43] R.J. Evans (a), op.cit., p.371

[44] I. Kershaw, op.cit., p.90

10

contrast, emerged as the charismatic demagogue proposing his own programme to create a greater Germany. As a result, in contrast with Stalin, the Nazi Party identified with and was built around Hitler and his 'vision' for Germany, leading Kershaw to comment that Hitler's style of rule was both 'personalised' and 'quasi-messianic'[45]. Hitler never faced fierce competition from within the party, as no one presented himself as an effective alternative. Indeed, it was only when the war was all but lost that there was an attempted assassination and coup led by von Stauffenburg, not himself a member of the Nazi Party, who was simply seeking to end the war on the most favourable terms for Germany. On the basis of this difference of political structure, I shall now focus on the differing ways in which the two regimes fell short of the totalitarian ideal.

In his 'quasi-messianic' position, Hitler was detached from the Nazi movement's bureaucracy, commenting in 1941: 'I've totally lost sight of the organisation of the party'[46]. In taking up this position, he dissociated himself from the everyday management of Nazi policies and executive power in implementing his 'vision'. Deter Rebentisch in the *Führerstaat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg* shows that in civilian affairs Hitler made only sporadic interventions, leaving him with no coherent grasp of relevant detail or clear directive for sustained policy making.[47] He showed little interest in political decisions, as shown by numerous testimonies from his adjutant, Fritz Wiedemann, and Lammers, the central link between Hitler and the state, of the extreme difficulty they encountered in extracting directives from him. Wiedemann stated that Hitler 'disliked the study of documents' and believed that 'many things sorted themselves out on their own if one did not interfere'[48].

Hitler's detached, indeed almost laissez-faire, style of civilian administration seems far removed from any serious attempt to establish a totalitarian state. A leader committed to achieving 'unmediated' control of his people would aim to exercise complete control on all matters or, at least, on as many as possible. Hitler's approach was completely 'untotalitarian' as it relied on the principle of relinquishing control over day to day decisions in the hope they would resolve themselves without his intervention. Delegation to others, which diminished his power and increased that of those near him, militated against his ability to exercise total 'unmediated' control over the state as the 'Leader Principle'

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[45] Ibid., p.106

[46] H. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's Table Talk,* London, 1953, p.153

[47] Dieter Rebentisch in the Führer*staat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, cited by Ian Kershaw in "Working towards the Führer". Although it has become clear that Hitler involved himself in civilian government to a considerable extent, it was usually at the prompting of one of the favoured Nazi leaders. Other than that, his interventions were sporadic and haphazard.

[48] Fritz Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr, werden wolte*, in I. Kershaw, op.cit., p.91

requires. Furthermore, the 'domestic power vacuum'[49] created by Hitler's leadership style directly led to the competing power structures outlined above as inimical with totalitarianism.

Stalin, by contrast, was a dedicated 'man of the machine', to use Suny's phrase[50], who frequently intervened on detailed policy matters. He personally chaired all important committees and sought to steer all government policies in the direction he favoured. Stalin, in Kershaw's view, consistently aimed to achieve a 'monopolisation of all decision making and concentration in the Politburo'[51]. It might therefore seem that Stalin was moving towards centralisation despite the apparent disorganised political structure of Russia during his regime. However, as we have seen, despite Stalin's attempts to monopolise power, he made only limited progress in this direction due to the continued existence of multiple and potentially conflicting political structures. As a result, many areas continued to enjoy at least 'partial autonomy from central control'[52]. Further, the concentration of power in the Politburo, had it been effectively achieved, would have created alternative positions of influence and authority within the organisation, which could have challenged Stalin's own grip on the state. In consequence, although Stalin may have had a programme more aimed at totalitarianism than Hitler, in effect, his actions did not represent a step towards the achievement of the totalitarian goal. Indeed, Kershaw admits that Stalin was prepared to de-stabilise the government organisation[53], encouraging the existence of multiple governmental structures in order to maintain his power. These actions were inconsistent with his aim of achieving a centralised totalitarian system. Even if it could be argued that, in this structural respect, Stalin, in aspiration, conformed to the method of totalitarianism, both Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, in their differing ways, failed to effect the degree of centralisation required for ideological monism. It is important to note, in considering Stalin's attempts to 'monopolise power in the Politburo, that his position and personal authority within the party were weaker than that of Hitler. As Suny argues convincingly, Stalin's position was open to effective challenge from within the party. Given Stalin's role as the leading bureaucrat and so chief exponent of Marxist-Lennism, he always could be challenged by bureaucratic or ideological rivals, such as Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Kamenev. Stalin's purges, in Suny's view, were a response to the threat of bureaucratic

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[49] R.J. Evans (b), op.cit. p.511

[50] R. G. Suny, "Stalin and his Stalinism: power and authority in the Soviet Union 1930-53" in *Nazism and Stalinism: Dictatorships in Comparison,* edited by Moshe Lewin and Ian Kershaw. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 38

[51] I. Kershaw, op.cit., p.91

[52] M. Mann, op.cit., p.151

[53] I. Kershaw, op.cit., p. 92

12

challenge and dissatisfaction with his rule[54], reflecting his lack of total control over the party machine. Even the mass killings and arrests carried out by the secret police, often represented as one of the starkest manifestations of totalitarian control, were less systematic than is often supposed. Mann argues that many of the 'purges and forced collectivisations… were local, even popular, initiatives which Stalin and his henchmen could not control'[55] and rather that constituting an effective method of centralised control were rather 'erratic shock-tactics' to modify 'fiefdoms and local autonomies'[56].

These structural similarities and differences show that neither state achieved totalitarian control nor was moving effectively in that direction, whatever the aspirations of the leaders may have been. The empirical historians were, therefore, correct in identifying the Nazis' and Stalinists' failure to centralise effectively as major evidence against the claim that either regime achieved the totalitarian ideal or were moving systematically towards it. However, the question remains of whether their failure to achieve or progress towards the totalitarian ideal undermines the validity of characterising them as totalitarian. Their apparent failures may result from inherent contradictions in the nature of totalitarianism itself. If so, totalitarianism would still be a valid conceptual tool for their analysis and explanation even if the ideal could not be fully reached in practice.

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Chapter 5

An alternative analysis

> *'The totalitarian ruler is confronted with the…task which… appears contradictory to the point of absurdity'*

> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.509

My hypothesis is that the failure of the two regimes to achieve or move towards the degree of centralisation required for successful totalitarianism is the result of a contradiction in totalitarianism itself. The goal of an 'unmediated' relationship between the leader, with unchallenged power, and his people (expressed by Arendt as the 'Leader principle') led to the creation of a multiplicity of competing government agencies and

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[54] R. G. Suny, op.cit., p. 48

[55] M. Mann, op.cit., p.137

[56] Ibid., p.138

bodies. The presence of this decentralised distribution of power in a "polycratic" system is inconsistent with another key feature of totalitarianism: ideological monism, which requires political centralisation in a closely unified system. This paradox in the nature of totalitarianism itself explains why both regimes failed to move towards it effectively but does not necessarily undermine its explanatory power for characterising Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

It is no accident that the structure set out in the previous section, with its inherent conflict and inconsistencies, as highlighted correctly by the empirical historians, is common to both regimes. Hitler and Stalin needed a variety of competing organisations to allow them to create and sustain the unchecked power over their people required for the totalitarian ideal. Arendt, as already noted, described this necessity, commenting that the Soviet regime relied on the creation of new offices to diminish the power of existing ones[57]. Both regimes maintained what Mann labels a 'divide-and-rule' strategy[58], fearing that without this, it would be possible for leading figures or departments to check their direct control of the population or even challenge their position as leader. This fear is clearly seen by Lewin, who describes Stalin as wary of the tendency of bureaucracy to regulate the absolute power of the leader and as responding by making it impossible for bureaucrats to become a 'fully fledged ruling class' in a 'quintessential Stalinist strategy… depriving the state of its power'[59]. In Germany, a similar strategy was adopted as 'for the Nazis the duplication of offices was a matter of principle and not just an expedient for providing jobs for party members'[60]. Each leader needed to be able to shift the channel of executive power from one institution to another, in order to maintain their pre-eminence and "unmediated" authority. However, these decentralised power structures generated competing organisations, each with the potential for its own distinctive ideological programme and perspective. The resulting pluralism undermined the ideological monism and belief in a 'single source of truth', essential for the totalitarian ideal. The professed goal for achieving greater power for the leader, as part of a totalitarian programme, led to the creation of a structure which undermined a different part of that very programme.

The same paradox can be seen from a different standpoint. The ideological monism required for the totalitarian ideal can only be successfully implemented if political power is effectively centralised in one organised hierarchy, designed to carry out the programme of the leader. However, such a centralised hierarchy would militate against the 'Leader

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[57] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.523

[58] M. Mann, op.cit., p.138

[59] M. Lewin, "Bureaucracy and the Stalinist State" in *Nazism and Stalinism: Dictatorships in Comparison,* edited by Moshe Lewin and Ian Kershaw, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.55

[60] H. Arendt, op.cit., p.516

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Principle' by setting up a 'reliable intervening level' of power between the leader and his people[61]. The fixed hierarchy created by centralisation sets up a constant filter through which the orders of the leader must pass. As a result, his power is inevitably mediated and disseminated through an executive hierarchy as in most political structures. In addition, any steps towards ideological monism through the centralisation of power would create possible alternative sources of authority among those close to the top of the hierarchy. This is why both leaders feared the growth of a stable bureaucratic hierarchy, necessary for ideological monism, as it might create a potential threat to their position and would definitely undermine their attempts to instantiate the 'Leader principle'.

As a result, the two necessary conditions for totalitarian control, the 'unmediated' power of the leader over his population and effective centralisation needed to implement ideological monism, cannot be combined. The presence of a unified hierarchy of power would pose a threat to the unchecked relationship between the leader and his people. However, the decentralised and disorganised system required for the 'unmediated' control of the leader led to a multiplicity of political structures inconsistent with ideological monism. It is necessary for an aspiring totalitarian regime to choose one of these two essential conditions. They cannot have both. In selecting one or the other, the possibility of achieving or moving towards a complete totalitarian state is undermined. In this way, totalitarianism is, in its nature, self-limiting as it cannot be fully realised in practice.

If totalitarianism is, in this way, essentially self-limiting, both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes could be characterised as totalitarian. Their shortcomings in achieving a complete totalitarian state, well documented by the empirical historians, are explained by the inconsistencies in the nature of totalitarianism itself. Given the inconsistency I have outlined, both regimes may well have been aspiring to instantiate a totalitarian state, even though they were unable to achieve it. Their inability to achieve or move further towards the effective centralisation required for the totalitarian ideal is a consequence of totalitarianism itself, not merely a coincidental feature of their particular historical development.

My theory has several advantages. Most importantly, it has explanatory power in accounting for the inconsistencies in the two regimes themselves as both leaders had contradictory aims, ideological monism and 'unmediated control'. Further, it allows both regimes to be characterised together as a distinctive political phenomenon emphasising the communalities the theorists of totalitarianism set out to explain. In addition, it takes account of and explains the clearly correct observations of the empirical historians who have objected to the use of the term "totalitarianism". Indeed it serves to undercut the long standing debate between these parties. Given the contradiction in totalitarianism, both

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[61] Ibid., p.525

regimes can be judged to be genuinely totalitarian even though neither was moving effectively towards the complete goal. Despite the attraction of this overarching theory, it is important to consider some objections so as to test its validity.

Arendt would argue that no new theory is required. In her view, the problems pointed out by the empirical historians were the manifestation of the 'planned shapelessness'[62] required for the 'Leader principle'. While she would claim, as I do, that both regimes were totalitarian, she would reject my hypothesis, suggesting that totalitarianism was a completely coherent (not contradictory) concept. The difficulty in her position, clearly shown by Samantha Power in her introduction to Arendt's book, is that she fails to characterise totalitarianism at any point[63] and so does not consider the separate and distinctive significance of ideological monism for the totalitarian ideal. Paradoxically, Arendt emphasises that totalitarian regimes strive for 'total loyalty' and 'total domination'[64] which could only be achieved through ideological monism. However, that notion plays no role in her theory.

Other theorists of totalitarianism might object to my hypothesis by arguing that the problems pointed out by the empirical historians only arose in these regimes because they were in the early stages of development. They might argue that the conflict between ideological monism and the 'Leader principle' is only faced at the initial stage of development and could be transcended over time. In the fully realised totalitarian state, decentralisation of political structures would allow the 'unmediated control' of the leader without undermining ideological monism. However, the contradiction I have outlined would arise at any stage in totalitarian development, unless all the members of the decentralised political agencies already had exactly the same views as the leader. However, this could only realistically be achieved if a totalitarian state had already been fully implemented to the extent that those in government already concurred in every respect with the leader, a feat beyond even the dystopia envisaged in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As a result, these contradictions are not solely confined to an early stage but seem endemic to all stages of development towards the totalitarian ideal and method.

A final objection is that the contradiction in totalitarianism noted in this section undermines its validity as a concept. Indeed, Mann supports this view, thinking it better that the term be 'removed from scholarly and popular discussion'[65] as it is incoherent. His conclusion is based on the assumption that only non-contradictory concepts are valid

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[62] Ibid., p.522

[63] S. Power, Introduction to *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Schocken Books, 1951, p. xv

[64] H. Arendt, op.cit., p. 429 and p.565

[65] M. Mann, op.cit., p.155

explanatory tools of political analysis. However, if the political phenomenon itself contains contradictions, it would be impossible to understand it with a non-contradictory concept. The latter would be incapable of explaining the contradictions which Mann describes throughout his essay as occurring in reality in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

The hypothesis that I have outlined provides the answer to the initial question: totalitarianism is still a valid political concept for characterising Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. The two regimes represent a distinctive political phenomenon which cannot be satisfactorily analysed as merely authoritarian, absolutist or dictatorial. The totalitarian ideal as outlined in chapter 3 separates these regimes from those simply employing illiberal methods of control. However, the totalitarian ideal is, as I have argued, inherently contradictory: the 'Leader principle' of an 'unmediated' relationship between the leader and his people' conflicts with the requirement for ideological monism. As a result, the phenomenon of totalitarianism is self-limiting in practice, since all its goals cannot be achieved together. Evidence for the essential self-limitation of totalitarianism is provided by the inconsistencies of the two regimes outlined by the empirical historians.

The significance of my theory can be seen by viewing it in the perspective of the "totalitarianism debate". Given, as I have argued in chapter 5, that totalitarianism is a contradictory concept, there is no inconsistency between the positions of the empirical historians and the initial theorists of totalitarianism. The former based their objections to classifying the two regimes as totalitarian on the misleading and incomplete definition of totalitarianism offered by the theorists. The latter were unaware of the extent to which the regimes fell short of the concept they had proposed. Indeed, the shortcomings of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia to move towards implementing totalitarianism, on which the contemporary debate has focused, is precisely what is to be expected since totalitarianism is itself contradictory in theory and self-limiting in practice.

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