

Totalitarianism

What does the term refer to? What is its historical context?

Gilbert Pleuger explores the term and its utility for students of History

UNIQUELY A TWENTIETH-CENTURY PHENOMENON, students will encounter the concept of totalitarianism in many courses on the period. Care should be taken to distinguish the concept from autocracy, dictatorship and single-party rule.

The history of the concept of totalitarianism

A simple definition of totalitarianism can be taken to be 'a system of rule, driven by an ideology, that seeks direction of all aspects of public activity, political, economic and social, and uses to that end, at least to a degree, propaganda and terror'. This definition, through brevity, is incomplete. To move toward a more complete understanding, a look at the history of its use can be helpful. This will indicate that initially it was not used as a critical judgement on a government. The word was probably first used by the Italian philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, in 1925, during the earlier years of Italian Fascist rule, to describe a comprehensive socio-political system. Mussolini happily used the word, and while in general it usefully describes Nazism and Stalinism, Hitler avoided its use and Stalin saw it as applicable to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany but not to Russia. The concept gained wider currency and became prominent in schoolbooks during the post-1945 Cold War period. It was at that time that it was defined more fully, notably by US historians Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956). Friedrich and Brzezinski's theoretical model, derived from the history of the twentieth century, had six key features.

- ♦ An official ideology to which general adherence was demanded, the ideology intended to achieve a 'perfect final stage of mankind'.
- ♦ A single mass party, hierarchically organised, closely interwoven with the state bureaucracy and typically led by one man.
- ♦ Monopolistic control of the armed forces.
- ♦ A similar monopoly of the means of effective mass communication.
- ♦ A system of terroristic police control.
- ♦ Central control and direction of the entire economy.

An instrument for comparison and assessment

During the Cold War time of ideological combat the concept was used by liberal democracies to condemn the political systems of communist states. While some will wish to amend parts of Friedrich and Brzezinski's depiction of totalitarianism, nevertheless their classification provides a six-part instrument with which to compare and assess the workings of states in the last century. If this conceptual model is applied to individual states, differences in the form

of totalitarianism and *variations in degree* can be identified. Here are one or two examples but readers can make more extensive and detailed assessments of the totalitarianism of the states considered.

Italy and Mussolini. Mussolini never created an exclusive ideology: Fascism existed alongside the Roman Catholic Church, illustrated by the Lateran Treaty of 1929, and the monarchy, that dismissed him in 1943. Italian Fascism has been likened to a *style* of government and compared to Germany and the USSR, Italian terrorist police activity was limited: Mussolini's singular economic policy, corporatism, was loosely executed. What Mussolini, with his grounding in journalism, did achieve was a skilful projection of Fascist ideas through propaganda. Hitler acknowledged that he learned from these successes.

The USSR and Stalin. Stalin vigorously followed a policy of strengthening Communist party power and, from the late 1920s, social and economic transformation but how far this can be seen as ideologically Marxist-Leninist policy continues to be debated among historians, as discussed by Jane Redfern in this issue.

The Third Reich and Hitler. When Hitler gained power he had already promoted a strongly nationalist/racist ideology for some time, not least in his prison book, *Mein Kampf* (1923), and he, with Dr Joseph Goebbels were outstanding practitioners of the use of mass communication, but Hitler's control of the armed forces, with their embedded Prussian officer corps mentality, took some time to achieve. Effective control of the entire economy (see the concept article, 'Economic autarchy') required a struggle and was successful only midway through the Second World War. Edgar Feuchtwanger has described the policy of Nazification, in his concise '*Gleichshaltung*' concept article and, in the next issue, David Welch charts the party/state administrative muddle in the Third Reich.

Democracy and totalitarianism

This writer has proposed elsewhere (*The Good History Students' Handbook*, 1993) that liberal democracy can develop only where certain circumstances exist. These include a degree of industrialisation, an active media and expressions and discussions of opinion. Also needed are attitudes, held in common within society, of tolerance, respect for minority and individual rights and the absence of fixed goals. Alert readers will note that a totalitarian system uses the same circumstances needed for liberal democracy and, harnessed to a fixed goal, acts to negate or reverse the attitudes that underpin democracy. Twentieth-century technology has provided the possibilities for the use of media (newspapers, radio, film and television) to 'brainwash' citizens, and modern communications to identify dissidents and co-ordinate action against them.