



Understanding Totalitarian Rule

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Ideology, as a comprehensive set of ideas, helps explain how one sees the world, where it comes from and is headed and where it stands. For some, ideology is a genuine belief system, while for others it is, functionally, simply political discourse. The culture it invariably breeds renders irrelevant, in practice, which understanding society has of ideological dogma. Three of modernity's most traumatic social/political experiments have been Communism, National Socialism (Nazism) and Fascism. All three utopian-premised movements, in pursuit of ideology, embraced totalitarianism as its "modus operandi".

The totalitarian mode of operation is uniquely formulated in structure to perpetrate an individual and/or movement in power with minimal challenges from any opposition once in place. Key to establishing and maintaining the totalitarian apparatus is organization. "Power as conceived by totalitarianism" cites eminent historian and political scientist Hannah Arendt, "lies exclusively in the force produced through organization." Spontaneity is lost. While the mirage of its existence appears so to the non-totalitarian world, the craft of organization is perfected through the forced compliance of the established rules, official guidelines, and the high cost of dissent. The art of totalitarianism, notes prominent professor and former U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, is "organizing political power." Hungarian author, Agnes Horvath quoted Soviet party expert, A. Avtorkhanov as citing, "The strength of the Communist regime resides... in its brilliant hierarchical system of power and the use made of that power..." With the end being the utilization of said power to formulate a new society and order by restructuring existing class or race configurations, production/human relations are overhauled so that a new culture can be instituted; a totalitarian culture. Organization is the mechanism.

Politics escapes nothing in a totalitarian-run society. Everything is politicized. Society now becomes divided into the integrated (with the movement) or the enemy (nonconforming). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt highlights the typical totalitarian hierarchical composition in essentially six levels. Fundamental to comprehending the totalitarian mode of operation, including its diligently delineated organizational component, is the dual subterfuge of its façade. It presents, at all times, in all aspects two faces:

one for the internal subjects and another, to the non-totalitarian world, of the totalitarian apparatus. At the bottom level are the fellow-travelers. These are mostly compiled by those who support the totalitarian regime and its objectives but typically live outside its territorial compounds. Most came from the non-totalitarian world and flock to the regime for ideological and/or economic reasons, as well as submission to blackmail. The fellow-travelers are instruments of the system mostly used for marketing benefits generated in its dealings with the non-totalitarian world. The power that they generate in the internal structure is minimal but their influence can be exceptional, dependent upon the value the regime places on their services at any given time. The front organizations are the next strata. Unlike authoritarian regimes, which are much more isolationists and do not concern themselves with imagery, totalitarian systems are quite susceptible to appearance maintenance. The image is not inhospitable to change. The radicalness of its ideological underpinning assures the movement the sufficient margin to mold itself and its means, to facilitate the attainment of its ends. Front organizations serve that purpose masterfully both for the internal world (totalitarian) and its external counterpart (non-totalitarian). This sophisticated stratagem formulates for the captive society a mechanism of control and filter. Being themselves mass organizations penetrated, run and choreographed by the ruling single party, they have no autonomy outside of the official dogma. They are monopolistic. There is a front organization for workers, one for students, a paramilitary watchdog committee, and another for women, etc.; one for each sector. Advances in the workplace, school, and access to housing, commodities, etc. are conditioned and measured by the activism displayed in these front organizations. Society is controlled and their level of integration with the movement (revolution) is meticulously noted and measured. They, therefore, serve as filters which the movement separates the perceived conforming from the non-conforming. They are totalitarianism's eyes, ears and face. The orchestrated crowds that welcome a foreign dignitary, protest in front of a "hostile" embassy, concentrate the masses in plazas to hear official speeches usually by the "leader," are all the design of the mass organizations, which serve as front for the ruling single party/movement.

Front organizations are the facade which the non-totalitarian world sees in foreign conferences and seek to give the appearance of equivalency with their counterparts of the Free World. Image maintenance is crucial for the sustenance of the totalitarian regime. The appearance of normalcy, which the totalitarian face seeks to project to those on the outside, is presented by the front organizations. It is their function in their dealing with the non-totalitarian world. Their existence is imperative for any totalitarian regime. The next layer, which itself contains three different tiers, is the most relevant.

Societies in totalitarian regimes are divided, as was cited earlier, into two categories: the integrated (conforming to the movement) and the nonconforming ("counter-revolutionary," countermovement). Within those

integrated with the movement are further varying degrees of movement-assimilation. The layer which follows the front (mass) organizations in totalitarian's hierarchical structure, are members of the single-ruling party. The draconian role of the party in every aspect of totalitarian life can not be understated. Renowned Italian Marxist Gramsci wrote in Prison Notebooks referring to the party and their role in society: "In order to judge—and in contemporary history of politics judgments is identical with action—we need to know, and this requires the knowledge of every thing that is knowable... a contact with the living and moving world, an ability to reach each and every individual." Any level of the party serves the regime. But the varying stratus qualifies them. This strata itself contains three differing tiers within the totalitarian apparatus. Membership in the party is a prerequisite for any position of power in the regime. Absolutely every high-ranking member of the armed forces, high-level government position must be a party member. The level of militancy, usefulness, aptitudes and political favoring which further stratify party members, some into autonomous, quasi-party entities that operates under the distant shadow of the party's structure, and to a great degree, control it. After the general members of the party, Communist or Nazi, are elite party formations. The secret police (differing names may apply given differing regimes) is the following layer.

While technically party members themselves, the secret police are autonomous and do not report to the general party governing entity but rather to the movement's (revolution's) "leader" directly. The secret police obeys its own rules and penetrates all levels of the party. They are the enforcers of democratic centralism, as well as in charge of internal espionage (not just the opposition, but also the military, government and other party members) and external (non-totalitarian world). This elite institution is secretly feared, particularly by other general party members (civil, military, government, etc.), given their enormous power within the apparatus. Following the secret police in the totalitarian network is the next phase in party membership: the elite secret police.

This higher totalitarian echelon forms an intimate circle around the "leader." The elite secret police serves, in many respects, as the counter-intelligence to the regular secret police. They also are autonomous from the rest of the party and also report directly to the "leader." A very selective process assures that only the most loyal and fanatical will join the corps of the elite secret service, undisputedly the regime's most revered terrorizing entity. They, like the regular secret police, are armies outside the armed forces and governments within the government, all with the absolute power curtailed in the totalitarian chain of command, only by the "leader" himself. At that point, the "leader" level is the epic of power within totalitarianism organizational structure. There the subject rules without the obstruction of any written law and embodies the movement, which is by this point the party and the state, with its laws and ideological abstractions. The "leader" contrives to incarnate the nation as well. The complete totalitarian hierarchical structure is configured so as to accommodate totalitarianism rule as willed by the tyrant.

It is the absolute perversion of power. Through this elaborate organization of society, political power is contrived in such a way as to assure minimal space for effective dissent and a very narrow route for material advancement: absolute adherences to the official dogma as determined, in that moment by the "leader" and have the ability to adjust to changing interpretations of ideology to suit the movement's ends. The most relevant factor to assure that society has only that extremely narrow route for moving space is the party.

Without the structural existence of the Communist and Nazi parties, totalitarianism could not and cannot be exercised. It is the indispensable contexture of the totalitarian wall. It bears no resemblance de facto or de jure to its semantic counterpart in the Free World. The totalitarian party is a process of steady osmosis, unlawfully violent (revolutionary, i.e. Bolsheviks) or legalistically nonviolent (constitutionally, i.e. Nazis), which commences from an ideological movement then converts itself, once approaching or having gained power to a party. The next step in the process is the appropriation of the state. This is the springboard to disseminate the totalitarian reign. The party-state can, at this point, spread, on a broad spectrum basis, the tenets of the ideology by attempting to institutionalize the counterculture domestically and, universally, present the state with its legitimacy mask, as the face for the non-totalitarian world. The state is, for non-totalitarian world purposes, the "dejure" governing body. The party is, without a doubt, the "defacto" sovereign.

Extraterritorially, this serves totalitarianism well since its façade entertains appearance and allows for needed concessions from the non-totalitarian world, i.e. trade privileges, non-aggression pacts, credit, market access, etc., all the while simultaneously, it assists compatible or comparable movements, sharing affinity for notions of class or race warfare.

Buchheim brilliantly observed, the term "party" neither arises from the theory of the totalitarian claim to power nor does it fit into the totalitarian ruling system; rather it belongs to the concept of the free political life, especially of democracy. In contrast, National Socialists and Communists have characterized themselves... as "movement" and "workers movement"... for their aims lay beyond what a genuine political party may establish as its goal. The "movement" is the typical form representing the totalitarian claim to power in politics. To the extent that such a political reality includes a democratic constitution, the movement can also represent itself as a party. But it is not a genuine party... After the seizure of power... the movement can continue to term itself a party in a certain sense if it demands to be the active and leading part of the whole people or the entire class. But it is an artificial meaning... the designation "party" is a linguistic remnant... After its "seizure of power" the totalitarian movement converts the state, which until then had been its enemy, into its slave. The movement maintains that it

alone represents the will of a people or a class, and it deprives the state of its existence as a sovereign legal institution. Totalitarianism carries out its politics, not within the framework of governmental order, but beyond all norms, and in this endeavor it employs the state simply as a tool whenever such manipulation appears useful.

The edifice that sustains totalitarianism, and its repressive tenet, is, as was earlier cited, the party. And the abstract superstructures which are indispensable and responsible for the party's political power are two elements. The subservience of the state to the party is one of the bedrock features in that building of totalitarian despotism. The other ineluctable component, the more important in totalitarianism's assemblage is democratic centralism. The idea of democratic centralism was conjectured by the father of Communist praxis, Vladimir Lenin. Premised on instigating non-factionalism, the end result was tyranny of the party. Glenn Chafetz in *Gorbachev, Reform and the Brezhnev Doctrine* highlighted Lenin's pretension, "Democratic centralism ideally stipulated the full and open discussion of a particular issue until a decision had been taken; after that point, all debate was to cease and all members and organizations were required to implement the decision... The application of the principle heavily favored the "centralism" at the expense of the "democratic" in order to muzzle dissent and to dictate hierarchical decisions." The fringe benefits afforded to totalitarianism from democratic centralism have been numerous. With the abolition of factions, inner party dissent was eliminated. The threat of elite conspiracies, coup d'état's, or "palace revolutions" are effectively dismissed from probable possibility as a result of democratic centralism. The closed environment on which the party's command functions simulates what Alexandre Koyré called "secret societies in broad daylight."

Hannah Arendt, echoing Georg Simmel's "Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies" in *The American Journal of Sociology* (Jan 1906), brilliantly observed that ... secret societies... form hierarchies according to degrees of "initiation," regulate the life of their members according to a secret and fictitious assumption which makes everything look as though it were something else, adopt a strategy of consistent lying to deceive the non-initiated external masses, demand unquestioning obedience from their members who are held together by allegiance to a ... leader, who himself is surrounded... by a small group of initiated who in turn are surrounded by the half-initiated who form a buffer area against the hostile profane world.

The "secret society" structure prevalent in the totalitarian party, and beautifully exposed and analyzed by Arendt and others, finds the core which unites the party, the unwavering loyalty, typically fanatical, to the "leader" who personifies the movement and/or secret society. Imitating Comte's naturalist-driven positivist paradigm, the party/secret society are the fundamentalists of an atheistic pseudo-religion. This political ambience

breeds coherently a "cult" around the "personality" figure of the "leader." The closed secret system insulates the despot in command exceptionally from internal enemies. The draconian centralization of authority as a result of democratic centralism, funnels the channel of power to the party's executioners and the "leaders" choice: the secret police.

Just as the party is the key to totalitarianism. The secret police is the sustenance of the totalitarian party. They are enforcers of democratic centralism. Lenin's Cheka, Stalin's MKVD, Hitler's SS, Mao's Red Guards, Pol Pot's Brigades, etc. all actively, relentlessly and fanatically repressed all levels of society. The party was, as democratic centralism required, no exception. Despite ideological differences, the totalitarian secret police was synonymous in its application and service to the maintenance of absolute tyranny. Carl J. Friedrich, in describing Nazi Germany's secret police, masterfully captured the commonality of this repressive elitist corps ...and the special relationship it enjoys with the "leader."

...Hitler found himself loyally supported throughout by Himmler and his guards (SS). He therefore made the SS into an autonomous organization within the party, directly reporting to him, and providing the party with the firm backbone that a totalitarian regime requires... As contrasted with the heterogeneous party membership, the SS membership was young and filled with zeal from the regimes (Hitler's) ideology; it thus became unquestioning, enthusiastic support of all the Fuhrer's actions... It has become quite clear... that the SS possessed a more radical, indeed fanatical attitude than the average party member of SA man. In course of time, the SS managed to infiltrate various key positions in party and government, especially the military and economic cadres."

There is not one existing enterprise, loyal or disaffectionate to the movement that is not penetrated by the secret police. Their presence is awesome, secret and everywhere.

While all forms of despotism depend on some variant of a secret police designed to infiltrate and neutralize the opposition, the uniqueness of totalitarianism's version is not only its applicable reluctance to stop the pursuit once its adversaries have been eliminated, but rather at that point (the beginning of real terror) ... the deliberate and premeditated policy of permeating of the totality of society, particularly the central nerve points of the system, i.e. military, party members, high ranking officials, etc. Former Yugoslav communist Milovan Djilas, totalitarianism targets not just "actual" enemies but also "potential" ones. With regards to its dealing with the non-totalitarian, outside world, the secret police enjoys a privileged disposition. The remuneration is ostensibly greater, not just in form of direct payments, but also the access to markets and available goods it produces, resulting in additional residual benefits. Most foreign embassies, consulates and regime-representation offices abroad are de facto run, by the secret police. The ability to work in a non-totalitarian country requires a high level of trust.

Those assigned to foreign service are among totalitarians most regarded. They are part of the draconian secrecy wall that clouds the inner workings of the system from the outside world, as well as the internal. The source of the secret police's power is the "will" of the "leader." This invocation of the ideology and the purpose of the movement as personified by the "leader," who is himself the embodiment of the movement (revolution), extends absolute impunity to the secret police and situates them above any law, even if such legalism mattered. Thus the secret society moat is well guarded by the anonymity of this intelligence army who bears absolute, unwavering loyalty to the "leader" and assures that its walls are protected from enemies, dissenters, competition and even friends.

Despite the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, six countries remain communist today: China, North Korea, Tibet, Cuba, Vietnam and Laos. Considerable economic liberalization (and ideological revisitation) in some: i.e., China, Vietnam; piecemeal reforms in others: i.e., Cuba, Tibet and Laos; and little in the remaining: i.e., North Korea has provided no concluding evidence of democratic installation. Ample analysis suggests that the repressive might of the ruling communist parties is enhanced with increased revenues offered to it by the benefits of commercialization with the non-communist world. Without political reforms which separate party and state, end single-party monopoly, extend property rights to all (not just party-elite and foreigners) and rule of law established, can totalitarian rule effectively be neutralized and withered away. Only then can its antithesis, civil society, flourish and liberty exist alongside of democracy.

1. Hannah Arendt. *The origins of totalitarianism*, new ed. San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1976, pg. 418.
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3. Horvath Agnes. et al. *The dissolution of communist power*. London: Routledge, 1992, pg. 15.
4. *Ibid*, 382.
5. Gramsci, A. Note sui Machiavelli sulla politica esullo stato moderna. *Tovino*: Ed. Rivant, 1975, pg. 1930.
6. Hans Buchheim. *Totalitarian rule: Its nature and characteristics*. Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1968, pg. 91.
7. Glenn Chafetz. *G. Gorbachev, reform and the Brezhnev doctrine*. Westport: Praeger, 1993, pg. 97.
8. Hannah Arendt. *The origins of totalitarianism*, new ed. San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1976, pg. 376.

9. Carl J. Friedrich. The evolving theory and practice of totalitarian regimes. Carl. J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis and Benjamin R. Barber. Totalitarianism in perspective: Three views. New York: Praeger, 1969, pg. 254.

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