Communism, Nazism and Maoism – a comparison

Following the Second World War, historians and political analysts began to use the term ‘totalitarian’ to denote the extreme authoritarianism that characterized particular regimes that had developed in Europe by the 1940s. Controversy arose when some analysts suggested that although communism and Nazism were sworn enemies, they were so similar in the methods they used that they were part of the same political phenomenon. Those on the Right and Left of the political divide (see pages 8 and 158) were outraged by the suggestion that their movements were the same in character as that of their bitter opponents. It is important, therefore, for historical balance when comparing the regimes to see how far they had common characteristics. Building on the analyses in the preceding chapters, this chapter offers a comparison of Stalin’s Soviet Union, Hitler’s Germany and Mao’s China and a survey of interpretations of authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

You need to consider the following questions throughout this chapter:

- What similar or contrasting features of the regimes can be identified?
- What main interpretations have been advanced to explain authoritarianism?

Comparing Stalin’s Soviet Union, Hitler’s Germany and Mao’s China

Key question: What similar or contrasting features of the regimes can be identified?

Dominant leaders

Each of the three regimes was led by a dominant individual who became identified with the cause he represented. Indeed, they were more than merely representative. All three individuals became the personification of the ideology they espoused:

- Stalin became Soviet communism (see page 49).
- Hitler became Nazism (see page 78).
- Mao Zedong became Chinese communism (see page 116).
No matter how far they removed themselves from the actual task of governing, as each of them occasionally did, their withdrawal did not diminish their authority. Hitler as Führer, Stalin as Vozhd and Mao as Chairman, were leaders in their own right as well as heads of the Nazi or Communist Party that ruled the nation. Theirs was always the ultimate authority.

→ Propaganda

Having attained power, the three leaders were sustained by a continuous propaganda campaign by their party that raised them above normal politics. The term ‘Red Tsar’, for example, which was applied to Stalin, was particularly appropriate since the position he held was akin to the divine right claimed by the Russian tsars. The tsars had regarded their authority as being sanctioned by a power that went beyond ordinary politics and which, therefore, could not be challenged by ordinary politicians; Stalin claimed something very similar. As leader of the CPSU and heir to Lenin, he was the sole, rightful interpreter of the dialectical laws of revolution, thus putting him beyond challenge or criticism. It is one of the great modern political paradoxes that communism, a theory dependent for its meaning on the concept of the collective will of the people as the only true historical dynamic, has, in every society where it has come to power, resulted in the dictatorship of a single leader.

If Stalin set the pattern of communist dictatorship, it was Mao Zedong who most spectacularly continued it. His control of political ideas in China was such that he came to be regarded by the party theorists as the culmination of communist thought. Mao’s ideologues described him in what amounted to religious terms. Communism was defined in China as Marxist–Leninist–Stalinist–Maoist thought, as if Mao were the last of the great prophets in a line of Marxist revelation.

Hitler also claimed a special affinity with history. He was portrayed in Nazi propaganda not simply as a peerless political leader, but as the incarnation of the spirit of Siegfried, the great hero of Teutonic tradition. Hitler, the representative of all that was best in the aspirations of the Aryan race, was fulfilling his historic role, leading Germany to its destiny as a great nation.

→ The leaders’ special status

As dictators in their respective countries, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong came to share a remarkable experience. Their political dominance and the adulation in which they were held by their peoples had the effect of removing them from reality. As they grew progressively more powerful, they became increasingly detached from the world around them. Their word was law and those permitted to have contact with them
necessarily said only what they judged their leader wanted to hear. There is a strong case for saying that by their later years each of them had become irrational, as was evident from the extraordinary decisions they made:

- Facing defeat in the last stages of the war, Hitler preferred to see the Third Reich destroyed rather than surrender.
- Stalin launched further destructive purges (see page 44) even though his power was already absolute.
- Mao deliberately created national turmoil in a bid to defy the future and leave his permanent mark on China.

**Organized hatred**

All three regimes used organized hatred as a political weapon, directing it at selected groups of victims defamed as enemies of the state. The three regimes elevated the *scapegoat* principle into a central policy. They developed the notion that there was in the midst of society a corrupting force that had to be eradicated, a notion used as a justification for terror in all three regimes. In Hitler's Germany, it was the race enemy — the Jews. In Stalin's USSR, it was class enemies — the Kulaks. In Mao's China, it was class traitors — the rightists and revisionists (see page 124). From their earliest involvement in revolutionary politics, the three men had embraced terror as an essential mode of action.

**SOURCE A**


All excessive actions have revolutionary significance. It is necessary to bring about a reign of terror in every rural area; otherwise we could never suppress the activities of the counterrevolutionaries in the countryside or overthrow the authority of the gentry. To right a wrong it is necessary to exceed the proper limits; the wrong cannot be righted without doing so.

**SOURCE B**


Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. The stronger has the greater right . . . Polish active force is to be destroyed again immediately . . . Continuous demolition to the point of complete annihilation.
Why were all three leaders prepared to resort to terror?

SOURCE C

[Stalin’s] capacity to turn on friends and subordinates and subject them to torture, forced labour and execution manifested a deeply disordered personality. He had a Georgian sense of honour and revenge. Notions of getting even with adversaries never left him. He had a Bolshevik viewpoint on Revolution. Violence, dictatorship and terror were methods he and fellow party veterans took to be normal. The physical extermination of enemies was entirely acceptable to them.

Terror

There was an insistence among all three leaders that their goal of revolution could be achieved only through the use of violence. They contended that no class ever relinquishes power willingly; power has to be dragged from it by force. Even then, the dispossessed class will fight back; that is why there are always opponents who have to be terrorized.

There was also the perceived foreign threat. Notwithstanding their opposed ideologies, all the totalitarian regimes claimed that they were engaged in a struggle for survival in a hostile world, a struggle so pressing that it justified the resort to extreme measures. The need to consolidate and preserve the security of the state was paramount. Communism for Stalin became precisely this, the survival of the Soviet state; this is what he meant by his insistence on the priority of ‘Socialism in One Country’.

The scale of terror was physically evident in one of the most fearful images of the twentieth century – the prison camp. Matching each other in their organized brutality were:

- the concentration camps in Hitler’s Germany (see page 76)
- the Gulag in Stalin’s Soviet Union (see page 43)
- the laogai in Mao’s PRC (see page 136).

Motivation behind the Terror

Figures can never be precise, but conservative estimates suggest that Nazi Germany wiped out 6 million European Jews, that Stalin’s purges resulted in the death of 20 million of his people and that a similar number died in China during Mao’s various anti-movements. But it was not simply cruelty for its own sake. All three leaders believed that the destruction of opponents was a matter of duty. They judged that so pressing were the needs of the nation that they justified the use of the most remorseless methods.

Whether the leaders planned the destruction of life on the scale that it occurred is much debated. Arguments have been advanced to suggest that, while Hitler and Stalin were ultimately responsible for the carnage that took place under them, it reached the proportions it did because of the actions of
enthusiastic underlings who seized the chance to indulge in the persecution of personal enemies. The particular charge against Mao is not that he actually willed the deaths that came with the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution but that he permitted them to occur, first, by miscalculating the risks attached to his policies and, then, by refusing to acknowledge that the disaster was happening.

**Cultural transformation**

A prominent feature of the regimes was the way in which they moved from political revolution to cultural transformation. The Third Reich under Hitler sought to establish a set of norms which allowed only Aryan racial concepts to be expressed. ‘Decadent influences’ in the arts, by which the Nazis principally meant Jewish works, were to be expunged from German culture. In the USSR, Stalin and the Party asserted that Soviet communism would produce a new type of human being, *homo Sovieticus*. Decadent bourgeois values, therefore, no longer had any in place in the new state that was being forged; creative artists were required to produce works wholly relevant to the needs of the workers.

Mao took up that theme in China in his Cultural Revolution, which set out to destroy all remnants of China’s artistic past. A major theme in his writings was that culture could not be separated from politics; it was an all-embracing phenomenon. It followed that if the arts were to continue as genuine expressions of Chinese communist culture they must carry no taint of the bourgeois past. State censorship became vital. This was the logic of his assault on the ‘Four Olds’ (see page 133), a form of nihilism intended to clear the way for an entirely new Chinese culture.

Noticably in all the regimes, there was a complete dismissal of the liberal concepts of open artistic expression and intellectual freedom. In Nazi and communist society, such principles were regarded as an unacceptable indulging of the individual at the expense of the greater social good.

**Religion**

In regard to religion, Stalin and Mao shared the same attitude. Since they viewed it as a construct of the exploiting classes, employed in pre-revolutionary times as a means of enslaving the masses, religion would not be tolerated. As a mere set of superstitions that distracted the people from reality, it was to be persecuted out of existence. Hitler took a more nuanced approach. Although he had little respect for religion in itself, regarding its otherworldly values as a challenge to the secular principles of Nazism, he was conscious of the strength of both Catholic and Protestant traditions in Germany. This did not stop him from attempting in various ways to undermine the position of the Churches, but he stopped short of open persecution. That he felt constrained to do so is a corrective to the idea that Nazism always acted in a fully totalitarian manner.
Secular faiths
There is an important sense in which the regimes may be described as secular faiths. Nazism, Stalinism and Maoism were regarded by their adherents as essential scientific truths, not merely political philosophies. In such circumstances, opposition was not simply a political act; it took on the character of a sacrilege. Dissidence became heresy and, since those guilty of it had affronted the values of the people, they had to be tried before the people. This was the rationale behind show trials, which were extensively used in all three regimes (see pages 40, 81 and 123). The accused were presented as heretics to be publicly shamed and humiliated before being condemned.

Freedom of movement
The three systems clearly had much in common, but there were also distinct differences. An important one is that relating to the freedom of movement of the population. Under Stalin, passports were made compulsory for internal travel within the USSR. These were used as a means of hunting down Kulaks (rich peasants) and dissidents who tried to escape persecution by moving to different areas to hide. Passports permitting travel in and out of the country were rarely issued and then only to privileged groups, such as Party members and selected athletes and cultural representatives.

Similar restrictions were applied in Mao's China. Citizens had to carry a hukou, a document giving details of their place of residence. There was no absolute right to residence in a particular place and the hukou was applied by the authorities in a variety of ways either to prohibit or to enforce people's movement. Mao used it effectively, albeit unscrupulously, during the Great Leap Forward to shift huge numbers of rural Chinese from the land to the industrial centres.

In contrast, Hitler's Germany, up to the outbreak of war in 1939, was notably relaxed in its attitude to travel and movement. As was shown by its successful mounting of the Olympic Games in 1936, it was eager to welcome foreign visitors. It is true that its own people needed state-issued passports to leave and to re-enter the country, but that was the requirement in all European states at that time. Germans were encouraged to travel abroad and, although those who did so tended to be the well-to-do, the same was again true for the rest of Europe; cheap mass tourism did not develop anywhere in Europe until after 1945. Moreover, a distinctive feature of Nazi social policy was its Kraft durch Freude (see page 95) programme which provided its workers with holidays and opportunities for travel within Germany. Restrictions were, of course, placed on German Jews, but since this group made up barely 1 per cent of the population, it was possible both for visitors and Germans not to be fully aware of the situation.

Economic revolution
A further prominent aspect of the regimes was their commitment to centrally-directed economic transformation. Stalin's vast collectivization and industrialization schemes in the USSR (see page 35), copied by Mao in China in
the Great Leap Forward, were meant to revolutionize the economy. Both men believed that without such transformation their regimes and their countries could not survive, since the hostile capitalist world would unite to crush them. Hitler's fears for Germany were not perhaps as intense as this. Nevertheless, he, too, saw economic advance as critical to his country's fortunes. Judging that war with the powers of Europe was a strong likelihood at some point in the future, he wanted Germany to develop an economy strong enough to meet the nation's military needs. That was the task he set his economic planners.

Nationalism

What now most impresses observers of the twentieth century is how powerful nationalism was as the great ideological driving force of its time. Right-wing movements such as Nazism and fascism were defined by their belief in the virtue and power of the nation-state. That also applied on the Left. To be sure, there were international communists such as Lenin who believed that the days of the nation-state were over and that class would become the determinant of all future societies. However, Lenin was in a minority. All the leaders of communist nations, including his own immediate successor in the USSR, Stalin, subordinated their communist ambitions to the needs of the states they led. Communism was the means to an end: the survival and development of the nation. In China, Mao Zedong adopted communism because it provided a political and social mechanism by which he could achieve his basic goal – the regeneration of the Chinese nation.
Interpretations of authoritarianism and totalitarianism

Key question: What main interpretations have been advanced to explain authoritarianism?

So central to modern history have the authoritarian regimes been that they have produced a range of interpretations that attempt to explain the outstanding political phenomena of the twentieth century. The following is a selection of some of the most influential analyses.

A rejection of individualism

The move towards totalitarianism was noted and approved of by the British scholar, E.H. Carr. As a Marxist, writing in the 1960s, he was strongly sympathetic towards Soviet communism, suggesting that it was ‘the creed for which modern civilization is waiting’. He observed that the effect of the Second World War had been to stimulate the collective principle which could best be achieved in practical terms by governments taking increasing power at the centre. He believed that the Western liberal tradition with its emphasis upon the individual was no longer appropriate to the twentieth century: ‘The trend away from individualism and towards totalitarianism is everywhere unmistakable.’ With what was later shown to be a naive misjudgement, Carr regarded Soviet totalitarianism as successful because it had built a modern economy, and acceptable because its aim was to serve the interests of the people.

A factional struggle

Carr’s views did not go unchallenged. Friedrich von Hayek, an influential Austrian analyst who had lived through the Nazi era, made a number of key observations in the 1970s. He stressed that the two major European totalitarian powers, the USSR and the Third Reich, were both socialist states. He saw their bitter rivalry as essentially a factional struggle between opposed wings of the same ideology. He argued that in politics, as in religion, it is disagreements between those who share the same basic faith that create the fiercest conflict. Neither National Socialism nor Soviet communism would admit the legitimacy of each other’s interpretation of socialism. Each regarded the other as heretical.

An ideological conflict

It was in protest against the notion that history was determined by iron laws of development that Karl Popper mounted a spirited defence of liberalism. Popper, whose long writing career lasted from the 1940s to the 1980s, was
disturbed by the trend towards collectivism evident in all the countries involved in the Second World War, and which was at its most oppressive in the totalitarian states. He took a strongly moral line arguing that, for all its failings, liberal-democracy was the only system in which individual freedom could be maintained. He argued that human society was too complex and varied for it to be definitively analysed and suggested that the supposedly scientific methods used in the attempt to do so were essentially the prejudices and a priori assumptions of those with a political agenda. In a reversal of true scientific enquiry, the Soviet and Nazi totalitarian regimes had started with an ideology to which they then bent the facts to make them fit.

**Totalitarianism as applied science**

One of the most influential writers on the subject was Hannah Arendt, who advanced the persuasive thesis that totalitarianism was a specifically twentieth-century ideology which grew out of the scientific developments of the previous century. Producing her main works between the 1950s and 1980s, she explained the mass appeal of totalitarianism by pointing to the fact that science had made such great advances in so many areas that it was possible to believe that it held the answer to all life’s problems. Ideologies had developed based on the conviction that human society could be scientifically analysed and the findings used to achieve directed social ends.

For Hannah Arendt, the outstanding example was Marxism (see page 19), which, claiming to have discovered the observable laws of social science, constructed a revolutionary programme around them. Nazism was also an appeal to science, but whereas Marxism was based on class struggle, Nazism was based on racial conflict. The striking point of similarity between them was that, since both claimed scientific validity, they were entitled to use violent, totalitarian methods to achieve their objectives. Possessed of the truth, they had no compunction about crushing their opponents, who, by definition, were always in the wrong.

**Nazism and Soviet communism as branches of the same tree**

Ernst Nolte, a Right-wing German philosopher of history, stirred controversy in the 1960s and 1970s by observing that, while Nazism and Stalinism were both undoubtedly totalitarian, Nazism had not developed independently. He suggested that Nazism came into being as a direct response to the growth of Soviet communism. Nolte’s most provocative argument was that the Holocaust (see page 103) was directly modelled on the annihilation policies first adopted by the Soviet Union.

Without going as far as Nolte, there were other analysts who interpreted the Right-wing dictatorships as essentially a reaction to the rise of communism, which in its international significance was a call for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the capitalist nations. The terror that this excited explained the readiness of so many of the Western countries to be tolerant of...
Right-wing dictatorships. International socialism had the effect of closing the ranks of the Right against what it regarded as its greatest threat. The British historian, A.J.P. Taylor, a man of Left-wing sympathies, explained: 'Men were obsessed by fear of Communism and saw in Fascism the salvation of society.'

→ **Nazism and Stalinism essentially different**

Rejecting Nolte’s contention, a number of German Marxist social historians, most notably Jurgen Habermas and Hans Mommsen, in response to the 1980s and 1990s by asserting that there was a distinct difference between Nazism and Stalinism. Without denying Soviet excesses, they argued that totalitarianism in the USSR had been an unavoidable reaction to the problems of sheer survival facing revolutionary Russia after 1917. In contrast, they argued, Nazism had been deliberately constructed as a front for the forces of the bourgeoisie. Rather than being a response to communism, Hitler and the Nazi movement had been created as a means of ensuring the survival and expansion of capitalism.

→ **Totalitarianism as a product of modern war and technology**

A noted Polish-American scholar and statesman, Zbigniew Brzezinski, built on the work of Hannah Arendt by promoting the idea in the 1980s that totalitarianism was a particular product of the twentieth century. He viewed the First World War as having stimulated the growth of communism and fascism in two interconnected ways: the disillusion caused by the war had encouraged extremist ideas and the wartime advances in communication technology had enabled these ideas to be imposed on a mass audience. For Brzezinski, the defining elements in totalitarian systems of both Left and Right were dominant and charismatic leaders at the head of subservient parties, who were wedded to an ideology and employed terror to maintain control. The outstanding examples were the regimes of Stalin, Hitler and Mao.

→ **Totalitarianism as a positive force**

Brzezinski established what may be called the mainstream interpretation of totalitarianism. But there were later notable shifts of emphasis. A revisionist school of historians who have been active since the 1980s and whose most representative figure is the Left-leaning Australian-American scholar, Sheila Fitzpatrick, have argued that the control exercised by Stalin in the USSR was markedly different from that of Hitler in Germany. For the revisionists, the Soviet Union was too poorly organized for it to have been a totalitarian state directly comparable to Nazi Germany. Fitzpatrick went further, asserting that the terror for which Stalin was notorious in the West had been exaggerated by Cold War propagandists. She suggested, moreover, that despite its repressive image, Stalinism had been a positive experience for many Soviet citizens, the purges having helped to create a more socially mobile society.
Modernization

For some scholars, totalitarianism as a phenomenon has to be understood as essentially a transition to modernization. The argument runs along these lines:

- Communism, in both its Stalinist and Maoist forms, and Nazism were essentially responses to the demands of modernization.
- So pressing were those demands that to achieve them required the most rigorous and sweeping methods. Modernization could be achieved only through central control.
- Tsarist Russia, Wilhelmine Germany, Nationalist China: none of them had proved capable of successfully modernizing. They had lacked the necessary economic and political institutions and the resolve.
- It was the ruthlessness of Stalin, Hitler and Mao in their respective countries that allowed the remarkable economic transformation to be undertaken.
- So enormous was the task that to judge them by the traditional standards of the liberal-democracies is to assess them by the wrong measure. To achieve industrialization on the scale required left no room for the niceties of democratic politics. Coercion and repression were minor considerations when the nation was struggling to establish the base of its own survival.

Summary Diagram

Interpretations of authoritarianism and totalitarianism

- Totalitarianism as a product of war and technology
- Nazism and Stalinism essentially different
- Totalitarianism developed from scientific thinking
- Ideological conflicts between competing models
- All were competing forms of socialism
- State or nation more important than the individual
- Response to modernization
Chapter summary

Communism, Nazism and Maoism – a comparison

The outstanding feature of the three regimes that set the pattern for twentieth-century authoritarianism was the dominance of their leaders. All three regimes have been described as totalitarian since, despite their ideological differences, Hitler, Stalin and Mao asserted supreme authority in their respective countries and imposed dictatorial methods of control.

The three leaders were sustained in power by a continuous propaganda campaign that raised them to cult status. They also claimed a special relationship with history, each representing himself as the fulfillment of his nation’s aspirations for progress and modernity. Such elevated claims tended to detach them from ordinary politics and made it impossible for legitimate opposition to form against them.

Intensely nationalistic in their aims, all three leaders identified dangerous elements within society – Kulaks in the USSR, Jews in the Third Reich and rightists in the PRC – who were then subjected to fierce persecution as a way of uniting the people in hatred of a common enemy. Sweeping reforms of the economy were another common feature as the regimes sought to become both industrially strong and militarily powerful. Unwilling to face challenge from alternative ideologies, the regimes suppressed religious worship and required that culture in all its forms must conform to the secular and artistic values of the state.

There were differences in the way the regimes operated, for example in the greater freedom of movement allowed in Hitler’s Germany compared with the strict controls in the USSR and the PRC. But, overall, it is the similarities in methods of control that are the most evident.

It is how those similarities are to be interpreted that has divided scholarly opinion in a continuing debate over the character of totalitarianism. The Right has tended to stress how close the Nazi and communist regimes were in the violence of their methods, some writers going so far as to suggest that the movements were essentially the same, nihilistic Nazism being simply a reaction to nihilistic Soviet communism. The Left has countered by emphasizing the ideological differences and arguing that the extremism of Soviet and Chinese communism was forced upon those regimes by the demands of modernization and the sheer need to survive.
**Examination practice**

Below are a number of different questions for you to practise. For guidance on how to answer exam-style questions, see Chapter 10.

1. Compare and contrast the use of terror by Mao and Stalin.
2. For what reasons and with what results did Hitler and Mao utilize propaganda?
3. Analyse the importance of prison systems for two leaders of single-party states, each from a different region.
4. Compare and contrast the rise to power of either Hitler and Stalin or Stalin and Mao.
5. Explain the significance of the army for both Hitler and Mao.
6. To what extent did both Stalin and Mao alter their nations' economic systems?
7. Discuss the importance of political ideology for both Hitler and Stalin.
8. Why did no effective opposition form against Mao, Stalin or Hitler within their own states?
9. Analyse the impact of two leaders of single-party states, each from a different region, on their states' arts.
10. To what extent did both Mao and Hitler utilize nationalism in their ideologies?

**Activities**

1. How successful were Hitler, Stalin and Mao in creating a totalitarian state? Rank each of these rulers in terms of their personal success in creating a single-party state centred upon themselves using the following categories (and others you can think of):
   - Economic policies
   - Social policies
   - Religious policies
   - Structure of government
   - Opposition
   
   You will need to define what success in each of these categories actually means.
2. Compare and contrast the views and actions of Stalin and Mao on the role of agriculture for the state.
3. Review the use of propaganda for the governments of Hitler, Stalin and Mao.
   - What themes and imagery did they have in common?
   - What was different?
   
   Create a display comparing and contrasting the various types of propaganda, with reference to the importance of symbolism, colours and the overall message.