

# Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism - Part One



*Hannah Arendt - Ills. Ingrid Bouws*

Hannah Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1949, by which time the world had been confronted with evidence of the Nazi apparatus of terror and destruction. The revelations of the atrocities were met with a high degree of incredulous probing despite a considerable body of evidence and a vast caché of recorded images. The individual capacity for comprehension was overwhelmed, and the nature and extent of these programmes added to the surreal nature of the revelations. In the case of the dedicated death camps of the so-called *Aktion Reinhard*, comparatively sparse documentation and very low survival rates obscured their significance in the immediate post-war years. The remaining death camps, Majdanek and Auschwitz, were both captured virtually intact. They were thus widely reported, whereas public knowledge of Auschwitz was already widespread in Germany and the Allied countries during the war.**[i]** In the case of Auschwitz, the evidence was lodged in still largely intact and meticulous archives. Nonetheless it had the effect of throwing into relief the machinery of destruction rather than its anonymous victims, for the extermination system had not only eliminated human biological life but had also systematically expunged cumulative life histories and any trace of prior existence whatsoever, ending with the

destruction of almost all traces of the dedicated extermination camps themselves, just prior to the Soviet invasion.

Although Arendt does not view genocide as a condition of totalitarian rule, she does argue that the 'totalitarian methods of domination' are uniquely suited to programmes of mass extermination (Arendt 1979: 440). Moreover, unlike previous regimes of terror, totalitarianism does not merely aim to eliminate physical life. Rather, 'total terror' is preceded by the abolition of civil and political rights, exclusion from public life, confiscation of property and, finally, the deportation and murder of entire extended families and their surrounding communities. In other words, total terror aims to eliminate the total life-world of the species, leaving few survivors either willing or able to relate their stories. In the case of the Nazi genocide, widespread complicity in Germany and the occupied territories meant that non-Jews were reluctant to share their knowledge or relate their experiences – an ingenious strategy that was seriously challenged only by Germany's post-war generation coming to maturity during the 1960s. Conversely, many survivors were disinclined to speak out. Often, memories had become repressed for fear that they would not be believed, out of the 'shame' of survival, or because of the trauma suffered. Incredulity was thus both a prevalent and understandable human reaction to the attempted total destruction of entire peoples, and in the post-war era the success of this Nazi strategy reinforced a culture of denial that perpetuated the victimisation of the survivors. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Primo Levi records the prescient words of one of his persecutors in Auschwitz:

*However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will be perhaps suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. (Levi 1988: 11)*

Here was unambiguous proof of the sheer 'logicality' of systematic genocide. The silence following the war was therefore quite literal, and the publication of *Origins* in 1951 could not and did not set out to bridge that chasm in the human imagination. It did, however, establish Arendt as the most authoritative and controversial theorist of the totalitarian.

The path leading to Arendt's first major published work was nonetheless a long

one. From being a somewhat politically disengaged youth, Arendt during the early 1930s experienced the world as a German-Jewish intellectual confronted with the Third Reich, first as a citizen escaping into exile in 1933 and later as a New York intellectual receiving news of the '*Final Solution of the Jewish Question*'. As a refugee in Paris from 1933 to 1941 Arendt was dispatched to an internment camp, an experience that forever impressed upon her the inherently tenuous status of the '*new kind of human being created by contemporary history*', those who '*are put into concentration camps by their foes and into internment camps by their friends*' (Arendt in Young-Bruehl 1982: 152). However, the much-noted emphasis given National Socialism in *Origins* cannot be wholly ascribed to Arendt's German origins and experience of Nazism.**[ii]** Rather, it is partly a function of the wealth of documentary evidence captured by the conquering Allies, together with the extensive first-hand accounts, memoirs, and interviews of Nazis in the immediate post-war period. Of course, the personal does inform Arendt's writing. From an early stage in its development, Arendt was sensitive to the inherent danger of dismissing Nazi ideology as an incoherent form of virulent nationalism. She viewed Nazi ideology, as indeed *all* totalitarian ideologies, as both coherent and internally consistent. These characteristics, combined with a relentless '*logicality*', underpinned the capacity to inspire a superstitious mass resignation born in terror.

As we have seen, Arendt was not the first theorist to reject the generic concept of '*fascism*', nor was *Origins* the first work to explore important similarities between the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships. In both of these respects, Carl Schmitt anticipates Arendt's reflections by almost two decades. Nevertheless, *Origins* yields a whole range of innovative insights that Schmitt could not have developed beyond a preliminary analysis in the 1933 work *Staat, Bewegung, Volk*. In a 1957 postscript to the 1933 essay *Further Development of the Total State in Germany*, Schmitt acknowledges Arendt's post-war interpretation as closely akin to his own theory of total dictatorship. Thus he argues that

*In the sociological and ideological analyses of totalitarianism qua novel contemporary phenomenon (Hannah Arendt, Talmon, C. J. Friedrich, Brzezinski) a dialectical moment may be discerned in the evolution of terminology. If the concept of totality is not merely quantitative but instead consists of a specific intensity of organised power, then it is not the state, but strictly a party that constitutes the subject and protagonist of totalitarianism. In these circumstances,*

*part of the erstwhile totality confronts the latter as a new totality and demotes the state to a mere quantitative totality. Accordingly, the historical dialectic brings about a negation of the erstwhile totality by a part thereof, whereas the latter asserts its status as something more than the pre-existing totality. In this sense, there are no totalitarian states, only totalitarian parties. (\*) (Schmitt 1973: 366f)*

My intention in this essay is to build on the thematic concerns present in Schmitt's seminal writings on Fascism and National Socialism, whilst shifting the focus to Arendt's distinctive totalitarianism thesis.**[iii]** Whereas Schmitt theorises the inversion of the party-state relationship, and the political primacy accorded the movement as incorporating both, Arendt integrates this defining structural innovation of totalitarian rule into her account of the role of ideology and terror in the actualisation of 'total domination'. Schmitt's prescient insights into the totalitarian assault upon the bourgeois nation-state manifests itself in his late-Weimar writing as a presentiment for 'a most awful expansion and a murderous imperialism' soon to engulf Europe (Schmitt 1999e: 205).**[iv]** Arendt, in turn, analyses that catastrophe in such innovative terms that her theory of totalitarianism has ever since defied easy categorisation, owing in no small part to her deeply philosophical premises only subsequently explicated in a series of important essays and her next major work, *The Human Condition* (1958). This is quite apparent in the central philosophical train of thought at work in *Origins*, which describes the progressive 'de-worlding' of the world by way of a 'gigantic apparatus of terror ... that serves to make man superfluous' (Arendt 1979: 457). Equally important, however, is Arendt's thesis of the foreclosure of the field of politics consequent upon the total *claim* that totalitarian regimes make on their populations. This will be the guiding theme of this chapter. Although that total 'claim' is backed by a coercive regime of terror, it also engages a dynamic of plebiscitary mobilisation unique to totalitarian regimes. The comprehensiveness of this control and manipulation 'politicises' all facets of social experience whilst simultaneously extracting the organised 'consent' of the populace in accordance with pre-set ideological goals. Totalitarian rule is thus distinguished from the mere imposition of an arbitrary personal will characteristic of tyranny, instead actively mobilising the population, even as it eliminates coexisting loyalties as well as autonomous institutional and social spaces.

### *Nazism and Stalinism*

Writing in the immediate post-war era, Arendt enjoyed an obvious advantage over

the pioneering theorists of the 1930s and early 1940s, for she was able to engage her philosophical training to gauge the existential impact of Hitler's rule on German society. Arendt was guided in her analysis by the conviction that the political forces at work in post-World War One Europe were guided neither by 'common sense' nor by 'self-interest'. These forces, epitomised by the 'totalitarian movements', were thus imbued with an unprecedented potential for destructiveness (Arendt 1979: vii). However, during the post-World War Two period, Arendt mistook a general mood of despair for her own sense of an 'ill-defined, general agreement that the essential structure of all civilisations is at a breaking point' (ibid.: vii), for the world that survived the cataclysm of Nazi rule included many intellectuals who strained to portray Stalin's pre- and post-war reign of terror as an unfortunate adjunct of the revolutionary transformation of society. The publication of Arendt's comparative study of Nazism and Stalinism at the height of the Cold War meant that her views were interpreted, if they were noted at all outside America, through the distorting prism of the reigning ideological presuppositions of her age. *Origins* routinely elicited the charge of Cold War-mongering, not least of all by those least flattered by the comparison. In the ideologically charged atmosphere of global contest, little attention was paid to the resumption of terror in the post-war Soviet Union and Arendt's interpretation of the 'sheer insanity' entailed in the 'logicality' of ideological thinking (Arendt, 1979: 473) found little resonance in the Western academy, especially during the 1960s and 1970s at the height of a resurgent Marxist discourse. It was only with the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989 that scholars would embark upon a fundamental reassessment of the Stalin years, a project that is still in process.

It was not without irony, therefore, that many partisans of the Soviet cause felt themselves compelled to defend all of Soviet history, as indeed the unfolding of the promise of the October Revolution, a view shared as axiomatic by anti-Communists. Arendt's rejection of causal interpretations of history eluded minds more attuned to the great nineteenth century meta-narratives of liberal progress and historical dialectics. Her refusal to concede anything to the seed of totalitarian ideology, and its harvest of untold corpses, met with widespread incomprehension and hostility. If it would be another forty years before Arendt's theory of totalitarianism would receive the serious consideration that it so richly deserves. Jerome Kohn identifies an important reason for the quite extraordinary animus of Arendt's many critics. Arendt's outrage at totalitarianism was, in his

words,

*... not a subjective emotional reaction foisted on a purportedly 'value free' scientific analysis; her anger is inherent in her judgement of a form of government that defaced the human world on whose behalf she sought to expose Nazism and Stalinism for what they were and what they did. (Kohn 2002: 629)*

Reflecting on the question of 'origins' that has so excited several generations of her critics, one detects an element of 'bewilderment' in Arendt's 1958 observation that

*... finally, it dawned on me that I was not engaged in writing a historical book, even though large parts of it clearly contain historical analyses, but a political book, in which whatever was of past history not only was seen from the vantage-point of the present, but would not have become visible at all without the light which the event, the emergence of totalitarianism, shed on it. In other words the 'origins' in the first and second part of the book are not causes that inevitably lead to certain effects; rather they became origins only after the event had taken place (Arendt 1958: 1).*

Arendt had thought it impossible to write 'history, not in order to save and conserve and render fit for remembrance, but on the contrary, in order to destroy' (Arendt, 1958: 1). In that, fortunately, she was wrong. In fact she devoted the rest of her life to proving herself wrong insofar as all of her subsequent works are an intervention, a quite extraordinary flowering of 'the human capacity to begin, that power to think and act in ways that are new' (Canovan 2000: 27).

### *'Working reality'*

My analysis of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism begins where she did, briefly tracing the contours of her complex interpretation of nineteenth century anti-Semitism and imperialism. Arendt's approach of prefacing her analysis of totalitarianism with lengthy excursions into nineteenth century European history has been much criticised, and misunderstood. [v] Thus her extensive analyses of anti-Semitism and imperialism in the first two parts of *Origins* are often misread as an argument for causality, as well as being held to account for the 'imbalance' in her treatment of Nazism and Stalinism. For her critics point to the markedly different forms of and roles played by anti-Semitism and imperialism in German and Soviet history. In this regard, Bernard Crick takes to task those critics who

fail to grasp Arendt's 'general philosophical position', which pointedly eschews the notion of a 'unique and necessary line of development toward what occurred. This is where the "model-builders", with their pretence at causality, go astray in reading her' (Crick 1979: 30). Rather than seeking the 'causes' of totalitarianism, Arendt explores the ways in which totalitarian movements not only exploit 'clichés of ideological explanation' to mobilise their followers, but also how they transform these ideologies into a 'working reality' by means of novel organisational forms and devices (Arendt 1979: 384). In other words, Arendt has something to say of general theoretical and philosophical significance and she is not attempting to write a comparative history of the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships. Within the limits imposed by the acknowledged lack of reliable sources about the inner workings especially of Stalin's dictatorship, Arendt is nonetheless able to construct a compelling case for viewing the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships as *sui generis*. At the heart of her account lies her insight that both dictatorships revealed a proclivity for transforming ideological systems of thought into deductive principles of action.

Critics on both the historical Left and Right have also, and quite rightly, stressed that the contents of the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies are fundamentally distinct; a fact of which Arendt was well aware. Arendt also concedes the 'shocking originality' of Nazi ideology, which, unlike communism, owed nothing to our 'respectable tradition' (Arendt in Young-Bruehl 1982: 276).**[vi]** However, whereas most commentators reduce totalitarian ideologies to their pedagogical functions, Arendt argues that in addition to being total 'instruments of explanation', these ideologies yield up the 'organisational principles' of the totalitarian system of government (Arendt 1979: 469). In other words, the organising principles of 'race' and 'class' in the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies respectively determine not just the organisation of the movement but of society as a whole. In this way, they identify categories of 'objective enemies' who are first isolated and then expunged totally from society. This process may generate both refugees and corpses. However, from the point of view of the leadership of the totalitarian movements, ideology is the basis of 'organisation', and these 'men consider everything and everybody in terms of organization' (Arendt 1979: 387).

In the final part of this essay, I address Arendt's analysis of the relation between ideology and terror, widely acknowledged as the touchstone of her totalitarianism thesis, which leads directly into her interpretation of the phenomenon of the

concentration camp system as the site of the experiment in 'total domination'. Whereas the link between terror and the concentration camp system is hardly controversial, both the impact of terror on the general populace in totalitarian societies and Arendt's concept of 'total domination' are far more so. We should note here that Arendt distinguishes between different forms of terror, arguing that the destruction of the public realm (and hence also of the capacity to act and to form relations of power) characteristic of tyrannical rule should not be conflated with the total destruction of the individual's capacity to establish private and social relations, which is coincident with the novel totalitarian condition of 'total domination'. Totalitarian rule transforms a condition of 'isolation' into an all-pervasive sense of 'loneliness' (ibid.: 474-5). Moreover, unlike solitude, which requires that the individual be alone, loneliness manifests 'itself most sharply in company with others' (ibid.: 476).

These distinctions have important ramifications for Arendt's concept of power, which she defines as the acting and speaking together of individuals, as constituting a public realm. The destruction of the public realm of politics by tyrannical government condemns both the tyrant and his subjects to a condition of isolation, arbitrary rule and powerlessness. Conversely, although totalitarianism, like tyranny, eliminates the public realm, it also eliminates the ground for sustainable relations of power. By destroying the 'inner spontaneity' (ibid.: 245) of individuals, totalitarian rule dominates human beings from within. The destruction of the individual capacity for action complements a complex dynamic of ideological compulsion and popular plebiscitary rule that implicates the totalitarian subjects in the policies of the regime. Moreover, the incremental radicalisation of the regime's policies is facilitated by the elimination of 'the distance between the rulers and the ruled and achieves a condition in which power and the will to power, as we understand them, play no role, or at best a secondary role' (ibid.: 325).

#### *A declaration of war on ideology*

Once the human collective is redefined in terms of the ideological imperatives of race or class - i.e., once the positive laws and stabilising institutions of political authority of the sovereign state are displaced by the primacy of a dynamic totalitarian movement - the impediments to total terror are removed and the reordering of society can proceed towards its preordained end. For Arendt, total terror constitutes a condition in which the 'consciously organized complicity of all



men in the crimes of the totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total... forcing them, in any event, to behave like murderers' (ibid.: 452). Although the order of terror varied between totalitarian societies and within these societies over time, and although total terror was only ever approximated in their respective camp systems, Arendt's concerns are of a different order. Certainly the Soviet purges and Nazi street massacres in Eastern Europe attest to the potential for a regime of violent terror. Nonetheless, Arendt argues that the relation established between the ruler and the ruled – established by the novel device of total domination – is both more complex and equivocal than it might appear. Thus the primary victims are only the most explicit target of the regime's terror, for these categories of 'objective enemy' are wont to be changed, or supplemented, over time, and members of the general populace can never be quite sure that they will not fall into some future category of 'objective enemy'. Moreover, unlike the tyrant, the totalitarian dictator is typically a popular figure and thus bound to his potential victims, who constitute society.

Ideology plays a crucial role in all of this. Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that *Origins* is a declaration of war on ideology. However, as Margaret Canovan has noted, it is also a proof of a profound and troubling paradox. For totalitarianism

*... illustrated the human capacity to begin, that power to think and act in ways that are new, contingent, and unpredictable that looms so large in [Arendt's] mature political theory. But the paradox of totalitarian novelty was that it represented an assault on that very ability to act and think as a unique individual. (Canovan 2000: 27)*

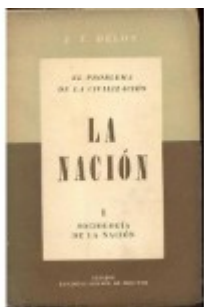
Reading *Origins*, one has a strong sense that Arendt despaired of the obtuseness of a generation of European intellectuals enslaved to ideology; the 'psychological toys' that wrought unprecedented misery and destruction. Conversely, it is not difficult to imagine what she would have made of the fraught historians' debates of the past two decades, both within Germany and about the Stalinist phase of Soviet rule, whose putative social scientific objectivity has done much to reinvent the wheel. In the process, old gripes about *Origins* have been rehashed rather unimaginatively and the 'debunking' exercise has gathered pace with ever more incognisant broadsides at a caricature of a work of extraordinary depth and brilliance.

In what follows, I will provide my own interpretation of the work followed, in chapter five of *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of her Times*, by a critical assessment of Arendt's most important detractors, whose ideological and personal biases in my view encumber their interpretation of a complex and difficult text. Throughout, my analysis of *Origins* will alert the reader to key elements of Arendt's post-*Origins* theoretical project, introduced in chapter two. The most important of these elements is Arendt's theorisation of totalitarianism's radical assault upon human individuality. The latter constitutes the very fundament of Arendt's post-*Origins* theoretical project, which articulates a pluralistic theory of the public realm that is both profound and topical. Whereas chapter two in *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of her Time* was concerned with Arendt's interpretation of the devaluation of politics in the long Western tradition of political philosophy, this essay will narrow the focus to her analysis of the destruction of the political in twentieth century totalitarian regimes. I address this aspect of Arendt's political thought more explicitly in the final chapter six of *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of her Time*, where I argue that one of the most perplexing and intriguing dimensions of Arendt's political thought is her apparent antipathy for the Continental European nation-state. For on the one hand, she argues that the nation-state, which has become virtually synonymous with political modernity, constitutes a barrier to the anti-state ambitions of the totalitarian movements. On the other hand, however, she is scathingly critical of the nation-state, which she views as something akin to an excrescence of political modernity. It is my contention that it is by grasping this curious paradox in one of history's greatest partisans of the political way of life that we may begin to understand and appreciate the true genius of Hannah Arendt's 'narrative', as it winds its way from the unspeakable horror of our darkest age to the light of a simple truth: that 'not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth' (Arendt 1979: 476).

### *Totalitarianism and the nation-state*

The modern European nation-state is accorded great significance by Arendt as an obstacle to totalitarian rule. Yet this fact, which is often overlooked, is also routinely misinterpreted as suggesting that Arendt was a proponent of the unitary nation-state or that despite herself, she embraced the *Rechtstaat* of her supposedly 'erstwhile philosophical enemy Hegel' (Villa 2007: 42). However, as I shall argue in the remainder of this study, nothing could be further from the truth. Arendt's reflections on the nation-state do confirm that she regarded the

stable institutions of the state as antithetical to totalitarian rule. However, in her attempts to come to terms with the totalitarian phenomenon, she embarked upon a fundamental reassessment of the modern nation-state that culminated in her embrace of the federal principle, as it emerged in the writings of the Founding Fathers and in the early political settlement that constituted the United States of America. It is nonetheless also true that this theoretical turn remained largely implicit in *Origins*. And it is this fact, in my view, that has led many commentators astray as they struggled to discern in this work just what Arendt proposed as an alternative to the sovereign nation-state in the wake of mankind's greatest ever disaster. To understand why Arendt viewed the nation-state as part of the problem rather than as part of its solution, we need firstly to understand why Arendt rejected the nation-state as a basis for reconstituting the political in the wake of totalitarianism. Moreover, her most concise formulation of the fundamental problem underlying her totalitarianism thesis is not contained in *Origins*, but in a little noted but highly significant essay published shortly after the war.



The brief review of J.T. Delos's book *La Nation*, which appeared in *The Review of Politics* in January 1946, is a *tour de force* of subtle argumentation and a seminal explication of Arendt's totalitarianism thesis. Arendt, in terms strikingly similar to Schmitt's late-Weimar works, analyses three phenomena of the 'modern world' that marked a break with Europe's pre-modern feudal order. Arendt, as far as I am aware, for the first time, broaches the complex question of the relation between 'nation', 'state' and 'nationalism', and the changing nature of this relation in nineteenth century Europe – an analysis that is subsequently incorporated into *Origins*. In the latter work, Arendt introduces her classic analysis of the *decline* of the nation-state, which culminates in her account of the crippling impact of both European imperialism and the First World War on the comity of European nation-states. It is these latter historical developments that Arendt highlights in *Origins*, arguing that the disintegration of the nation-state under the impact of these events bore 'nearly all the elements necessary for the subsequent rise of the totalitarian movements and governments' (Arendt 1979: xxi). To understand how Arendt came to this view, the modest little essay in question proves to be highly instructive.

As with so many other seemingly jaded topics of political thought, Arendt breathes new life into the well-worn question of Europe's transition from the feudal period to the modern age of the nation-state, even wresting from this question novel insights that were to constitute key elements of her theory of totalitarianism. She contends, firstly, that political modernity displaced traditional universal claims of civilisation with a 'particular, national civilisation'. Secondly, she identifies a theme that was to play an important and controversial role in her analysis of totalitarianism: namely the emergence of 'masses' whose 'atomisation' was a prerequisite of both imperialistic domination and totalitarianism. Finally, she acknowledges that modern civilisation is grounded in the 'reconstitution of the state (after the period of feudalism)', which however 'does not solve the fundamental problem of the state: the origin and legality of its power' (Arendt 1946c: 207, 208). Arendt also contrasts definitions of 'nation' and 'state'. Whereas a nation is defined as a people connected by past labour and a shared history, constitutive of a 'closed society to which one belongs by right of birth', the state is an 'open society, ruling over a territory where its power protects and makes the law'. Conversely, Arendt argues, *nationalism*, or the 'conquest of the state through the nation', emerged simultaneously with the nineteenth century national state. Henceforth, the identification of nation and state generated a tension between the territorial state *qua* legal institution protecting the rights of citizens and the rights of nationals. As a legal institution, the state only recognises the rights of citizens, no matter what their nationality. As a 'power institution', however, the territorial state 'may claim more territory and become aggressive – an attitude which is quite alien to the national body which, on the contrary, has put an end to migrations'. Thus, the melding of state and nation continually endangers the 'old dream' of a pacified community of sovereign nations, since it combines the principle of sovereign nationhood with the 'enterprise of power' (ibid.: 208), and which the ideology of nationalism imbues with a paradoxical urge towards nation-state imperialist expansion.

This brief review is fascinating for several reasons. Arendt engages an enduring preoccupation with the interrelation between nation, state, nationalism, imperialism and totalitarianism. There is an unmistakably Schmittian flavour in her description of the nineteenth century phenomenon of liberal individualism, which in its original conception envisages the state supposedly ruling over 'mere individuals, over an atomised society whose very atomisation it was called upon to protect. But this modern state was also a "strong state" which through its

growing tendency towards centralisation monopolised the whole of political life', drawing on the 'cement of national sentiment' (ibid.: 209) to reconcile the logic of a powerful centralised state and an atomised liberal society:

*As the sovereignty of the nation was shaped after the model of the sovereignty of the individual, so the sovereignty of the state as national state was the representative and (in its totalitarian forms) the monopolizer of both. The state conquered by the nation became the supreme individual before which all other individuals had to bow. (ibid.: 209)*

Up to this point, Arendt's argument seems to be little more than a restatement of the common view of Western European 'totalitarianism' *qua* powerful state, infused with an extreme nationalist ideology, such as we find in the Fascist dictatorship. Arendt even provides us with a working definition of Fascism insofar as she speaks of a powerful national state 'monopolising' the sovereignty of the individual. What is interesting in this argument is the subtle shift from a sovereign state representing the sovereignty of the nation and individual, to a state transformed into an instrument of the nation, and as subordinating 'all laws and the legal institutions of the state' to the welfare of the nation. From this, Arendt draws the conclusion that it is 'quite erroneous to see the evil of our times in a deification of the state', rather than in the conquest of the state by the nation (ibid.: 209).**[vii]**

Although Arendt, in this review, does not yet make an explicit distinction between Fascism and National Socialism, she is nonetheless concerned with the emergence of totalitarian 'movements' and the 'first forms of totalitarianism' marking the transition from the 'nation-state' to the 'totalitarian state', as 'nationalism becomes fascism' (ibid.: 210).**[viii]** However, the real interest of this intervention lies in Arendt's brief account of how this transition comes about by way of the transformation, or perversion, of the Hegelian concept of the state. Arendt argues that the conquest of the state by the nation was preceded by the adoption of the principle of the 'sovereignty of the nation', which in turn was modelled after the sovereignty of the individual. For as long as the state retained its sovereign power and political primacy, this development went unnoticed. However, the rise of nationalism during the nineteenth century undermined the sovereignty of the state until, finally, the nation asserted its sovereignty over the state. By successfully challenging the sovereignty of the state, the nation not only asserted its sovereignty over the state, but also fundamentally transformed the

state. For it was distinctive of the Hegelian conception of the state that the 'Idea' existed as an independent entity 'above' the state, rather than being identified with the state. Conversely, whereas the identification of nation and state did not eliminate the Hegelian 'conception as a whole', it nonetheless replaced the Hegelian 'Idea', variously, with the 'idea of the nation, the Spirit of the people, the Soul of the race, or other equivalents' (ibid.: 209).

Arendt argues that what now occurs is that the 'Idea', deprived of its autonomous or transcendent character, becomes identified with an 'absolute principle', which in turn is realised in 'the movement of history' itself. Henceforth,

*... all modern political theories which lead to totalitarianism present an immersion of an absolute principle into reality in the form of a historical movement; and it is this absoluteness, which they pretend to embody, which gives them their 'right' of priority over the individual conscience. (Arendt 1946c: 209)*

The 'individualisation of the moral universal within a collective', conceived in Hegel's theory of state and history, thus survives in a perverted form in the modern mass movements, once their ideologies are stripped of their Hegelian idealism. The totalitarian movements are 'charged with philosophy', taking possession of the 'idea' – be it of nation, race, or class – which is realised in the movement itself. Whereas liberal parliamentary parties typically pursue objectives or ends 'outside' of themselves, totalitarian movements effect the identification of means and ends. In Arendt's quotation of Delos that 'the characteristic of totalitarianism is not only to absorb man within the group, but also to surrender him to becoming' (Delos in ibid.: 210), we encounter what was soon to become a fundamental tenet of her theory of totalitarianism. Against this 'seeming reality of the general and the universal', she argues, 'the particular reality of the individual person appears, indeed, as a *quantité négligeable*, submerged in the stream of public life which, since it is organized as a movement, is the universal itself' (ibid.). This extraordinary passage articulates Arendt's sense of individuals in totalitarian societies surrendered to a process of becoming, actualised by their absorption into the totalitarian movement and swept along by the ineluctable laws of Nature or History, into the gas chambers and Gulags of her generation.

#### *The relation between nationalism and totalitarianism*

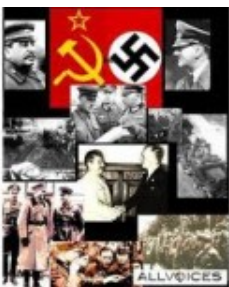
This brief review also presages the major themes of Arendt's post-*Origins* political thought, and their relation to her yet to be articulated theory of totalitarianism.

Thus, Arendt highlights the problem of reconciling the individual's rights as man, citizen, and national; a paradox magnified rather than resolved by the ideology of nationalism, and one that is indeed a touchstone of early twenty-first century political thought. Anticipating a key finding of *Origins*, Arendt argues that totalitarianism has exposed the folly inherent in attempts to reconcile nation and state. In her view, the only justification of the state is its function as 'the supreme protector of a law which guarantees man his rights as man, his rights as citizen and his rights as a national', subject however to the proviso that '*the rights of man and citizen are primary rights, whereas the rights of nationals are derived and implied in them*' (ibid.; emphasis added). She contends, accordingly, that the post-war refashioning of legal state institutions presupposes the *distinction* between the citizen and the national, between the political order and the national order. In an era characterised by the countervailing forces of 'growing unity' and 'growing national consciousness of peoples', Arendt, anticipating the central thesis of her 1963 work *On Revolution*, proposes the federal principle, whose logic transforms nationality into a 'personal status rather than a territorial one' (ibid.). This is a crucial dimension of Arendt's post-*Origins* political thought that flows directly from her analysis of totalitarianism and her political pluralism, drawing on the experience of the only successful revolution of modern times – the American War of Independence.

Arendt concludes her review by criticising Delos for focusing on the relation between nationalism and totalitarianism, whilst occluding the question of imperialism. Critics have long decried Arendt's 'preoccupation' with imperialism as an 'element' in the crystalline structure of European totalitarianism. This is especially true of historians, who mistakenly interpret Arendt's analysis of imperialism as a history of imperialist politics, rather than a brilliant and highly original interpretation of a mentality – of 'brutality and megalomania' – that would 'destroy the political body of the nation-state' (Arendt 1979: 124, 125).<sup>[ix]</sup> This mentality, although hardly totalitarian, presaged the totalitarian conviction that 'everything is possible', a mode of apprehending the world that drew much of its energy from the limitless destructiveness wrought by the First World War. The notion of a 'movement' itself bespeaks the expansiveness of the imperialist mentality, and the historical forces unleashed by Europe's orgy of violence – a universal becoming that is antithetical to 'stable worldly structures'. I earlier noted Arendt's notion of the identification of means and ends as characteristic of modern mass 'movements', a development that eliminates the distinction between

the institution of the political party and its objectives. In her view, the identification of means and ends goes to the heart of the totalitarian assumption of 'eternal dynamism', which overflows all spatial and historical boundaries, and the totalitarian conception of the political, which is stripped of all humanly recognisable utilitarian goals. The boundless dynamism of totalitarian rule is antithetical to the liberal institutionalisation of political rule as well as its territorially finite state, whose legal guarantees of civil and political rights presuppose a stable constitutional order. In his *Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel*, Hitler provides a succinct description of the liberal state's dystopic opposite:

*The foreign policy of the bourgeois world is in truth always only focused on borders, whereas the National Socialist movement, in contrast, will pursue a policy focused on space ... The National Socialist movement ... knows no Germanization ... but only the expansion of our own people ... The national conception will not be determined by previous patriotic notions of state, but rather by ethnic and racial conceptions. The German borders of 1914 ... represented something just as unfinished as peoples' borders always are. The division of territory on the earth is always the momentary result of a struggle and an evolution that is in no way finished, but that naturally continues to progress. (Hitler in Bartov 2004: 4)*



National Socialism  
Fascism

Arendt could not have known this work when she wrote either the review in question or *Origins*, since the manuscript was discovered in 1958 and published only in 1961. Yet there is an uncanny resonance between her analysis of the internal contradictions of the nation-state and Hitler's stated goals.[x] Hitler dismisses the bourgeois notion of a stabilised, territorially delimited state. Nazi expansionism, moreover, 'knows no Germanization' and therefore eschews the



Roman model of a politically integrated and naturalised imperial domain, proposing instead an ethnically and racially exclusive movement, which eliminates obstacles to a continuously expanding Aryan realm. Rather than incorporating territories and their native populations into a proposed new *Reich*, Hitler envisaged an exclusive racial elite 'cleansing' territories for settlement by 'our own people'. Thus 'the National Socialist movement... will never see in the subjugated, so-called Germanised, Czechs or Poles a national, let alone folkish, strengthening, but only the racial weakening of our own people' (Hitler 1961: 45). Hitler, it should be noted, wrote this in 1928.

From this perspective, the idealisation of the state is not only antithetical to the Nazi project but would in fact constitute a deliverance from its most radical objectives. Hitler early on identified the bourgeois territorial state first and foremost as an obstacle to his ideological goals. Conversely, Arendt theorises these objectives in terms of a totalitarian movement subordinating the state to the 'ideas' of nation, race, or class in pre-1925 Fascism, Nazism and post-1929 Stalinism, respectively:

*The state, even as a one-party dictatorship, was felt to be in the way of the ever-changing needs of an ever-growing movement ... while the 'party above parties' wanted only to seize the state machine, the true movement aimed at its destruction; while the former still recognized the state as highest authority once its representation had fallen into the hands of the members of one party (as in Mussolini's Italy), the latter recognised the movement as independent of and superior in authority to the state. (Arendt 1979: 260)*

The importance of this statement, in my view, exceeds the merely controversial claim that totalitarian regimes are, strictly speaking, not state forms at all.

Arendt is arguing that however imperfectly, the modern nation-state has performed the function of the ancient *polis*. By attacking the institutions of the state, the totalitarian movements gauged, correctly as it turned out, the one great vulnerability of the bourgeois nation-state in the post-World War One era; namely, its complete lack of defences in the face of extra-parliamentary and extra-legal challenges to state authority. In Arendt's view, Western European totalitarian movements exploited the conditions of 'mass society' born of the 'decay of the Continental party system [that] went hand in hand with a decline of the prestige of the nation-state ... and it is obvious that the more rigid the country's class

system, the more class-conscious its people had been, the more dramatic and dangerous was this breakdown' (ibid.: 261-2). The masses springing from the cataclysm of total war were distinguished from the rabble of former centuries by the fact that they were 'masses' in a strict sense, without

*... common interests to bind them together or any kind of common 'consent' which, according to Cicero, constitutes inter-est, that which is between men, ranging all the way from material to spiritual and other matters. (Arendt 1953c: 406)[xi]*

In Germany's case, at least during the late Weimar period, the party system could no longer fulfil its function of ordering the public world and the class system had begun to disintegrate (Arendt 1979: 260-1). Developments in the Soviet Union were markedly different and more complex, although there too, war and revolution had shattered its neo-feudal class system. Yet Arendt's central point in this regard is that Lenin's 'revolutionary dictatorship', whatever its totalitarian elements and proclivities, remained bound to attempts to stabilise the revolution and restore a semblance of rational policy calculation. For this reason, Arendt stresses Stalin's 'second revolution' of 1929 and the purges of the 1930s, which targeted residual class loyalties and social hierarchies in a campaign that was geared to securing Stalin's unchallenged, total authority. However, before I address this dimension of Arendt's totalitarianism thesis, we need to look more closely at Arendt's controversial account of developments in nineteenth century Europe, which she addresses in the first two parts of *Origins*, and which many commentators have misconstrued as 'causal' elements in the genesis of Europe's inter-war crises.

### *Anti-semitism and imperialism in nineteenth-century Europe*

*Bolshevism and Nazism at the height of their power outgrew mere tribal nationalism and had little use for those who were still actually convinced of it in principle, rather than as mere propaganda material. (Hannah Arendt)*

In her introduction to the original edition of *Origins*, Arendt identifies the 'spurious grandeur of "historical necessity"' (Arendt 1979: viii) as the antithesis of political thought and action. For Arendt, comprehension does not entail 'deducing the unprecedented from precedents' but rather 'facing up to' events, without submitting to the view that they are somehow preordained (ibid.). The

‘emancipation from reality and experience’ (ibid.: 471) effected by ideological argumentation degrades our political faculties. For this reason, Maurice Cranston argues, *Origins* refrains from any ‘naïve empiricist notion of causality in history, and in looking for “origins”, seeks only to locate the factors which led up to totalitarianism and make it intelligible’ (Cranston 1982: 58).

This is not a view that is universally shared. Agnes Heller, for example, argues that Arendt views totalitarianism as ‘the offspring of our modern, Western culture’ (Heller 1989a: 253) and as such ‘could only emerge after all previous events of modernity had all unfolded’ (ibid.: 254).**[xii]** On the basis of these assumptions, Heller goes on to criticise Arendt for a residual evolutionism insofar as she allegedly ‘attributed [a] certain kind of necessity to the factual sequence of historical events’ (ibid.: 253).**[xiii]** The passage in question, referred to above in a different context, appears in the Preface to the first edition of *Origins* in which Arendt alludes to ‘The subterranean stream of Western history [that] has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition’ (Arendt 1979: ix). And yet this passage is deserving of a contextual reading. Heller, righting Arendt’s wrong, proposes an alternative perspective, suggesting that ‘the fact that history unfolds in a certain way does not prove that it could not have been otherwise’ (Heller 1989a: 254). Indeed, as Arendt repeatedly stresses, comprehension means

*... examining and bearing consciously the burden that events have placed upon us – neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise. (Arendt 1979: xiv; emphasis added)*

Arendt is arguing that we assume responsibility for events that have already unfolded, that past deeds are irreversible and future developments unknowable given the radical contingencies of life. From this perspective, and given what we know of the historical circumstances, totalitarianism was not an inevitable outcome of Europe’s long series of inter-war crises, although these certainly aided the formation and ascendancy of totalitarian movements. Still, for Arendt the lessons and conclusions to be drawn from Europe’s cataclysm of war and revolution do not include the surrender to a logic of inevitability, according to which totalitarianism is ‘explained’ as the preordained outcome of historical forces inherent in ‘political modernity’. The irreversibility of what happened does not mean that it could not have happened differently. It is Heller, after all, and

not Arendt who ventures the opinion that the 'totalitarian option had been present since the dawn of modernity' (Heller 1989a: 254).

In the 1967 Preface to Part One of *Origins*, Arendt explains herself:

*Since only the final crystallizing catastrophe brought these subterranean trends into the open and to public notice, there has been a tendency to simply equate totalitarianism with its elements and origins – as though every outburst of antisemitism or racism or imperialism could be identified as 'totalitarianism'. (Arendt 1979: xv)*

As countervailing undercurrents or tributaries of mainstream European developments during the nineteenth century the 'elements' that later 'crystallized in the novel totalitarian phenomenon' – post-Enlightenment racism and nation-state imperialism – were scarcely noticed. Still, 'hidden from the light of the public and the attention of enlightened men, they had been able to gather an entirely unexpected virulence' (ibid.) until, finally, the catastrophic impact and revolutionary afterlife of the First World War thrust them into prominence. In retrospect, Arendt regretted the choice of title, arguing that *Origins* 'does not really deal with the "origins" of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but gives an historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism' (Arendt in Kateb 1984: 55). Accordingly, as Benhabib notes, the title of the book constitutes a 'misnomer' (Benhabib 1994: 114), one that has played no small part in the misreading of Arendt's central arguments.

### *The two key elements*

The two key 'elements' that feature prominently in *Origins* are 'anti-Semitism' and 'imperialism'. Unsurprisingly, Arendt presents a novel interpretation of both, steering a wide berth around the prevailing clichés then current in the literature. This is especially true of her controversial account of the former, which distinguishes between historical forms of religious and social anti-Semitism on the one hand, and the Nazi ideology of biological racism on the other. She contends that prior to the advent of Nazism, anti-Semitism played a purely secondary role in European history and politics, and was of far less significance than the phenomena of imperialism and class politics. In this view, the first time the 'Jewish Question' assumed importance in the national politics of a country was following the Nazi seizure of power, and it was preceded by meticulous groundwork during the 1920s, that saw the Nazis elevate anti-Semitism from

gutter politics to the organising principle, firstly, of the Nazi totalitarian movement, and subsequently of the Nazi dictatorship. None of this would have been possible, or at least very likely, would it not have been for the devastation of total war, which transformed the landscape of possibilities in post-war Germany much as the Bolshevik Revolution – itself no small miracle of history – blasted away the detritus of a reified tradition.

From a present-day perspective, the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, Sinti and Roma, and homosexuals seems all but inevitable. Yet despite the enormity and sheer horror of the Nazi mass crimes, they entered popular Western consciousness relatively late, and only began to play a central role in Western historiography more than a decade after the war. Arendt wrote and lectured extensively about the Nazi mass crimes during the final war years, whereas following the war her focus shifted to theorising the ‘radical discontinuity’ and novelty of the totalitarian system of government (Kateb 1984: 55; see 149; Benhabib 1994: 119). Arendt repeatedly returned to the theme of historical contingency; her view, that is, that ‘the story told by [history] is a story with many beginnings but no end’ (Arendt 1953b: 399). Her distinctive historical sensibility contrasts powerfully with what Villa terms ‘Hegelian-type teleologies, whether of progress or doom’ (Villa 1999: 181). In various different contexts, and in all of her works, Arendt challenges deterministic philosophies of history that reduce the unprecedented to precedents. In the aforementioned 1967 Preface, Arendt describes all such approaches as no less ‘misleading in the search for historical truth’ as they are ‘pernicious for political judgement’. She illustrates this point with a startling analogy. If we were to reduce National Socialism to racism, moreover employing the latter term indiscriminately, then we might reasonably conclude from the racism characteristic of government in the Southern states of the United States that ‘large areas of the United States have been under totalitarian rule for more than a century’. Hence, to grasp the radical novelty of Nazi ideology, we need to acknowledge the distinction between ‘pre-totalitarian and totalitarian’ forms of racism and anti-Semitism. Only in this way will we be able to understand the role played by Nazi biological racism in the regime’s ideological and organisational innovations. For the cataclysm that was Nazi rule was a fusion of novel forms of ideology and political organisation, which attained its most concentrated expression in the death factories for the production of human corpses. If this destructive phenomenon could now *seem* to have been predictable, this is only because we have recovered our senses following the first

shock of discovery.

The complexity of Arendt's analysis of anti-Semitism mirrors the welter of conflicting social and political forces at work in nineteenth century Europe, which were all tied, in one way or another, to the emergence of modern European imperialism and the concomitant decline of the nation-state during the last quarter of the century. Arendt contends that the acquisition of empire undermined the national political institutions of the imperial states and fundamentally transformed the balance of forces and interests that had sustained the latter for much of political modernity. This was particularly evident in changing popular attitudes towards Western European Jewry, which mirrored the declining influence of the Jewish bourgeoisie in Europe's royal houses. Arendt cites an interesting precedent in this regard. For Tocqueville's analysis of revolutionary France similarly pointed to the coincidence of popular hatred for the aristocracy and the dissolution of the latter's political power. In other words, resentment was a function of the growing disjunction between the aristocracy's great wealth and privilege on the one hand, and its rapidly declining political power on the other. For the state of 'wealth without power or aloofness without a policy' are felt to be parasitical by masses accustomed to associating wealth with sovereign power, even if that association often enough consists in a relation between oppressor and oppressed (Arendt 1979: 4). Similarly, European Jewry was tolerated within the national body politic for as long as its pseudo-bourgeoisie served a demonstrable public function in the comity of European nation-states. This 'function' was derived from its close economic ties to Europe's royal houses and state institutions. When Continental Europe's class system began to break down and her nation-state system began to disintegrate during the late nineteenth century, the various Jewish bourgeoisies lost their public functions and influence without suffering a concomitant loss of material wealth. Moreover, unlike the Christian bourgeoisie, the class of privileged Jews had never been accepted into Europe's class system, which itself contradicted the principle of equality upon which the modern state was founded. In other words, the Jewish elite did not even belong to a class of oppressors, whereas 'even exploitation and oppression still make society work and establish some kind of order' (ibid.: 5).



## A caricature of Alfred Dreyfus 'The Traitor'

Arendt is suggesting that hatred of Europe's Christian bourgeoisie stemmed from its role in the exploitation and oppression of the masses. Conversely, their Jewish counterparts were, first and foremost, ethnic and religious outsiders whose tenuous social status was an exclusive function of their economic usefulness. Once they had been deprived of their privileged access to the aristocracy, they were bereft of any 'useful' function. Henceforth, growing anti-Jewish sentiment could be exploited by a new class of political parties and movements, whose anti-Semitism was no longer merely social or religious in nature, but now assumed a distinctive 'ideological' character. Arendt cites the Dreyfus Affair as emblematic of this new mentality and of the changed political circumstances; a 'foregleam of the twentieth century', insofar as the domestic politics of a modern state 'was crystallized in the issue of antisemitism' (ibid.: 93, 94). This signified the transformation of social and religious anti-Semitism into a political creed that served as the organising principle of mass political movements. These movements were now able to exploit and manipulate popular anti-Semitism as they propagated their ideologies of the 'alien Jew' and a Jewish world conspiracy. Arendt notes the striking fact that persecution of European Jewry intensified in an inverse relation to its declining political influence, for Europe's Jewish communities had become 'powerless or power-losing groups' (ibid.: 5).

### *Ideological scientificity*

Anti-Semitism had become infected by what Arendt terms 'ideological scientificity' or a form of political discourse that was released 'from the control of the present' by positing an inevitable historical outcome, which is by its very nature immune to all tests of validity (ibid.: 346). This mode of ideological argumentation was but one step removed from its totalitarian incarnation, for the

Nazis infused this device with a prophetic quality whose infallibility derived from the fact that their policies were geared to realising their stated ideological goals. By transforming the 'idea' - race in racism - into an all-encompassing explanation of the unfolding 'movement' of history, which in turn was realised through the application of 'total terror', the Nazis eliminated all competing 'ideas', as well as all contradictions and obstacles that might stand in the way of an ideological vision and reality (ibid.: 469). I will address the relation in Arendt's thought between totalitarian ideology and total terror in greater detail below. In the present context, however, I should like to stress Arendt's related argument that the 'only direct, unadulterated consequence of nineteenth-century anti-Semitic movements was not Nazism but, on the contrary, Zionism' (ibid.: xv). For Zionism emerged as a form of 'counter-ideology' and a political response to the age-old problem of European social and religious anti-Semitism. Conversely, such relation as there was between Zionism and Nazi racism was limited to the exploitation of Zionism and conventional anti-Semitism by the Nazi movement to foster and underscore its claims of a global Jewish conspiracy. In this way a peculiar triangular dialectic was established between anti-Semitism, Zionism and Nazism, that was only finally resolved with the establishment of Israel in 1948.

Thus, pre-Nazi anti-Semitism served as a virtual palette for propagandists, who manipulated the history of Jewry in ways that reinforced the urgency of the so-called 'Jewish question' (ibid.: 6-7, 355). Moreover, the Nazi movement revolutionised the function of ideology, and ideologized the 'Jewish question', by transforming mere anti-Semitic 'opinion' into an immutable 'principle of self-definition' (ibid.: 356). Identity, rather than being a social, religious or economic category, was redefined in objective, 'scientific' terms as the biological-racial characteristics of the individual on the one hand, and as the imperative of conserving the racial characteristics of the master species or *Volk* on the other. For the first time in history, racism had become the organising principle of a mass political movement, and would soon also become the binding ideology of a totalitarian system of government. By displacing sovereign political authority from the state to the totalitarian movement, the German state was redefined as a "'means" for the conservation of the race, [just] as the state, according to Bolshevik propaganda, is only an instrument in the struggle of classes' (ibid.: 357).

One other aspect of Arendt's engagement with the question of anti-Semitism in



*Origins* should be noted here. Although Arendt's interpretation of Nazi racism focuses quite heavily on the question of anti-Semitism, this is largely a reflection of the status of European Jewry as the principal target of the Nazi genocide. However, once her focus shifted to the broader category and implications of Nazi biological racism, she stressed that there were also other categories of victims of the Nazi genocide, which moreover reveals the truly unprecedented nature of Nazi ambitions. Thus for example, in the 1963 work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt argues that Eichmann was guilty of the extermination of Sinti and Roma 'in exactly the same way he was guilty of the extermination of the Jews' (Arendt 1964e: 245). This is still regarded by many as a controversial statement, although it should not be. Nazi racism did not just envisage the extermination of European Jewry but aimed at a total reordering of the racial demographics of occupied Europe. Hitler had already begun to implement his '*Generalplan Ost*' prior to Germany's defeat. The policy envisaged the resettlement of millions of SS cadres, beginning with the elite 'Order of Heinrich Himmler', and entailed 'ethnic cleansing' on an unprecedented scale and the expansion of the camp system across the occupied territories of the East (Schulte 2001: 287, 307-09, 334-51, 376-8; Browning 2004: 240-1). Hence, the ultimate goal of Hitler's race-ideology entailed even greater horrors and considerably greater numbers of potential victims. It was only Hitler's defeat in 1945 that spared the world from the broader goals of the 'Final Solution'.

Imperialism, the topic of the second part of *Origins*, played a more direct role in mainstream European politics between 1884 and the outbreak of World War One. It was, moreover, the most significant element leading Europe into the catastrophe of total war. Arendt focuses on the anomalies of nation-state imperialism, which set the stage for a global war, in whose wake social and political institutions were shattered and entirely new categories of 'superfluous' humanity were generated. However, Arendt's interest does not lie in the history of imperialism's warmongering as much as in its hubris of intent. She argues that conquest and empire are destined to end in tyranny unless they are based primarily upon law; law, that is, as understood by the Roman Republic as integrating, rather than merely assimilating the heterogeneous conquered peoples as subjects of a common polity. The dilemma posed by overseas conquest was that it contradicted and ultimately undermined the national principle of 'a homogenous population's active consent to its government', which ever since the dawn of political modernity had constituted the *raison d'être* of the nation-state.

Thus Europe's imperial ambitions, propelled by the economically driven rush for resources and markets, were not matched by a viable political model of imperial rule. The exclusion of the extra-national territories and peoples from the body politic of the conquering powers meant that rather than grounding their rule in the principle of justice, the imperial states were reduced to forcibly extracting the 'consent' of the subject peoples to their own subjugation (Arendt 1979: 125). This device of rule impacted most directly on the colonial entities. Nonetheless, in the wake of the First World War, Europe, too, experienced the condition of 'statelessness' and all that went with the loss of constitutionally guaranteed national rights. Millions of displaced refugees were generated by policies of expulsion from former national territories and the loss of these territories. This was accompanied by widespread economic crises, which in turn generated social conflict and dislocation. These conditions were antithetical to Europe's Enlightenment understanding of a socially integrated and politically secured citizenship. They also resembled conditions that had been generated by the imperial powers in their colonial possessions.

Arendt's analysis of modern imperialism investigates the parallels between the impact of empire on the subjugated peoples and the impact of total war on the peoples of the imperial powers. Moreover, it targets modern imperialism's idealisation of 'power', which went hand in hand with the instrumentalization of violence. In other words violence, rather than serving the ends of law and its enforcement, 'turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate' (ibid.: 137). If we recall, for Arendt violence and force are antithetical to her concept of power, which she defines as the acting and speaking together of the citizenry. In Europe's imperial domain, however, the 'power export' mobilised the state's instruments of violence, the police and the army, which were liberated from the control and constraints imposed by national institutions, becoming themselves 'national representatives' in undeveloped countries (ibid.: 136). Therefore, at the outset of the imperialist adventure, institutions that performed constitutionally proscribed and prescribed functions in Western societies were deprived of their proper function and invested with enormous sovereign powers. Restricted to the realm of empire, these developments were destructive enough, since the logic of unlimited expansion forestalls the establishment of enduring and stabilising political structures, and 'its logical consequence is the destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered peoples as well as of the people at home' (ibid.: 137). Still, in the

relatively short life span of the European empires, the national institutions of the imperial states, though corrupted by empire, withstood its corrosive effects. The same cannot be said of their totalitarian successors. In their expansionary phases, both Germany and the Soviet Union

*... dissolved and destroyed all politically stabilized structures, their own as well as those of other peoples. The mere export of [imperialist] violence made the servants into masters without giving them the master's prerogative: the possible creation of something new. Monopolistic concentration and tremendous accumulation of violence at home made the servants [of totalitarianism] active agents in the destruction, until finally totalitarian expansion became a nation- and people-destroying force. (ibid.: 138)*

Whereas European imperialism legitimated the violent excesses of an anti-political conception of power reduced to a function of political domination, totalitarianism eliminated the political institutions which control the exercise of power, and which are intended to serve the political community.

Arendt's analysis of imperialism's pre-totalitarian power principle is complemented by a novel interpretation of what she terms 'race-thinking', whose key elements are traceable to various strands of eighteenth century European thought, but whose emergence during the nineteenth century brought it into conflict with the competing ideologies of 'class-thinking'. These two dominant strains of political thought now competed for dominance in the collective consciousness of European peoples. Around the time of the 'Scramble for Africa', following the Berlin conference of 1884, race-thinking flourished as a corollary of imperialistic policies. Arendt cites Count Arthur de Gobineau as the most important progenitor of all modern race theories. His 'frankly ridiculous' doctrine is described as the product of a 'frustrated nobleman and romantic intellectual'. But for all that Gobineau may have 'invented racism almost by accident' (ibid.: 172), his ideas proved particularly influential fifty years after their formulation, in 1853 - at a time, that is, when European dominance of the globe was at its height. Gobineau's 'doctrine of decay' was never biological in the manner of Nazi racism, since it posited that mere acceptance of the ideology of race was proof positive that an individual was 'well-bred'. Nonetheless, it inspired a generation of European intellectuals, amongst whom may be counted very respectable figures indeed. Arendt's point, however, is that Gobinism's amalgamation of race and 'elite' concepts energised 'the inherent irresponsibility of romantic opinions',

since it resonated with the latter's preoccupation with the 'self' and the romantic yearning to impart 'inner experiences' with universal 'historical significance' (ibid.: 175).



Joseph  
Arthur de  
Gobineau

### *Race-thinking*

In re-functionalising pre-modern 'race-thinking', National Socialism installed 'a race of princes' as the subjects of this history – a substitute aristocracy, the Aryans, whose function was to rescue society from the levelling effects of democracy. Conceived in these social terms, Gobinism, though distinct from Nazism's biological racism, appealed to turn-of-the-century intellectuals preoccupied with the problem of *decadence* and overwhelmed by a pessimistic mood that revolved around the notion of the inevitable decline of Western civilisation. Gobineau's ideas would also find considerable resonance in a later generation of Germans, whose trauma of despair in the wake of the Great War gradually made way for a radical ideology of redemption, which adopted Gobineau's category of race and adapted it to the biological 'necessities' underpinning an ideology of 'racial hygiene'. For this generation of racial thinkers, the logic of purity henceforth demanded that the pure be rescued, that the impure must be destroyed as a matter of course, thereby actually setting in motion 'the "inevitable" decay of mankind in a supreme effort to destroy it' (ibid.: 173).

For race-thinking to make the transition to racism, and thence to becoming a fully-fledged ideology in Arendt's sense, the preoccupations of nineteenth century romantics and intellectual adventurers underwent, firstly, a political marriage of convenience with imperialistic policies and, secondly, were seized upon by "scientific" preachers':

*For an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that it claims to possess either the*

*key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe', or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man. (ibid.: 159)*

Ideologies in this sense are not theoretical doctrines but come into existence and are perpetuated as a 'political weapon'. Their 'scientific aspect' serves as a foil for the spurious basis of supposedly infallible arguments, whose great power of persuasion derives from their logical construction. None of the nineteenth century ideologies, Arendt argues, were predestined to triumph over the others. Instead, they coexisted as a matter of course in the liberal polity, some gaining prominence with unfolding events such as the 'Scramble for Africa', others emerging as fully fledged ideologies in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and the First World War. Arendt nonetheless acknowledges the predominance in early twentieth century Europe of the secular ideas of 'race' and 'class', whose ascendancy was a function of their appeal to the experiences and desires of the masses engaged in or affected by political conflicts between Europe's nation-states and amongst its social classes. These ideologies thus enjoyed the advantage that they resonated with existing social and political realities, predating and preceding the adoption by the totalitarian movements of the ideas of race and class as the mobilising and organising principles of their revolutionary movements (ibid.: 159, 160).

Arendt's extensive analysis of race-thinking and racism, like her treatment of colonialism and imperialism, targets the political dimension and impact that modes of thought, immersed in the historical experiences of conquering and dominating, being conquered and being dominated, were to have on post-war Europe. To the extent that race-thinking was an historical adjunct to European imperialism, it had already become politicised, although none of the imperial powers had adopted the notion of racial domination itself as a core value of the national political culture of their countries. Still, Arendt argues that the destructive potential of these ideologies was prefigured in the thinking of the modern imperialists and in the mentality of the imperial elites and bureaucratic foot-soldiers. Arendt views the injunction 'exterminate the brutes' as more than a literary device, whereas Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* conveys the brutish mentality of the times, which was put to devastating effect in 'the most terrible massacres in recent history'. Particularly Germany's African domain and the Belgian Congo were the scenes of 'wild murdering' and decimation. Ignorant

settlers and brutal adventurers responded ruthlessly to a humanity that 'so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species' (ibid.: 185). Racism and bureaucracy developed on parallel tracks, and they converged in the practice of 'administrative massacres'.

The key factor here is that race-thinking and racism fulfilled a legitimating function vis-à-vis imperial policy without of its own accord generating new conflicts or producing 'new categories of political thinking' (ibid.: 183). In Arendt's view, even champions of the 'race' idea, such as Gobineau and Disraeli, were ill-equipped to fathom the true significance of the novel experiences of European settlers, whose 'brutal deeds and active bestiality' were neither acknowledged nor understood, but which nonetheless had a pernicious effect on the European body politic (ibid.: 183). Race-thinking and racism were home-grown European ideologies, yet they gathered an 'unexpected virulence' in the context of colonial policy, and the conflicts between the colonial powers, for whom the lives of the indigenous populations counted as little more than expendable labour power. In other words, 'an abyss' had opened up 'between men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge' (ibid.). Viewed as a justification rather than as a principle of political action, race-thinking did not become the driving force of European imperialism during the nineteenth century. Still, whether defined culturally, linguistically, geographically, or biologically, once a particular race seized upon racial domination as the organising principle of its national polity there was no predicting the inherent force of its destructiveness. In this sense, 'class-thinking' was a variation on the theme of radical identity politics, and following the Bolshevik Revolution the idea of class made its transition from a Marxist critique of relations of class domination to a policy of exterminating so-called counter-revolutionary classes.

The gradual substitution of race for nation was set in motion during the late imperial era. Conversely, the advent of modern bureaucracy as a substitute for government shattered the constraints against power accumulation that had been put in place by a liberal regime of limited government (ibid.: 186). In other words, modern bureaucracy revolutionised the state, expanding its reach and ability to control society (and colonies) in ways not envisaged by the proponents of the modern European nation-state. When applied to Europe's imperial domain, a regime of 'aimless process' (ibid.: 216) provided the colonial administrator with

an effective device for instilling order, without having to resort to the customary homeland practice of enforcing the rule of law. Once the enormous power potential of an administrative regime was freed of legal constraints and was placed in the hands of colonial administrators, a limitless horizon of administrative decrees replaced the customary legal and institutional constraints that form the basis of all forms of civilised government. This was a new experience for modern man, one that introduced into politics the 'superstition of a possible and magic identification of man with the forces of history' (ibid.). 'The law of expansion', the boundless terrain of imperialistic ambition, and the belief that the realisation of empire entailed entry into 'the stream of historical necessity' - of being 'embraced and driven by some big movement' (ibid.: 220) - promoted a new sense and intoxication with serving a power greater than oneself. Arendt quotes revealing passages from T. E. Lawrence, who at the end of his career seemed as uncomprehending of his true 'function' as he was desolate in its absence (ibid.: 218-21).[14]

Still, in Arendt's view, even this archetype of the modern adventurer 'had not yet been seized by the fanaticism of an ideology of movement' (ibid.: 220), although he did seem to believe that he was an instrument of 'historical necessity' - a functionary of secret forces prevailing in the world independent of human will or design. Although Lawrence was very much a product of his era, for Arendt he also represents a transitional figure, whose willing participation in a cause transcending individual interest and purpose heralded a later generation of adventurers thrown into prominence by the First World War. In the wake of Europe's disaster, novel political movements emerged armed with both fully fledged ideologies and forms of bureaucratic organisation that would prove more destructive than anything produced by Europe's imperialist ambitions. The power potential of these new entities resided in their discovery that ideologies become 'political weapons' in the hands of totalitarian movements. The Bolshevik Revolution was of particular significance in this regard, since it manifested, for the first time, the new power structure of a modern revolutionary dictatorship, which although pre-totalitarian in Arendt's sense, saw ideology assume the role once played by 'opinion' and 'interest' in the handling of public affairs. Ideologies in their totalitarian forms are by definition impervious to the 'undetermined infinity of forms of living-together' (ibid.: 443). Arendt contends that what the Soviet Union lacked under Lenin was a leadership devoted, as a matter of principle, to a policy of mass terror (see especially ibid.: 305-23, 379-80). The

levelling and equalising force of totalitarian terror targets individuality, plurality, natality, spontaneity, and freedom – our distinctly human traits – reordering human relations in accordance with the ideological imperatives of ‘total domination’. A philosophical term which is commonly misunderstood in the secondary literature as suggesting an idealistic conception of ‘total power’, ‘total domination’ constitutes the touchstone of Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism and the mirror image of her post-*Origins* theorisation of action and politics. Ideology and terror constitute complementary devices in the hands of totalitarian movements, which always seek to fabricate ‘something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species’ (ibid.: 438). In other words, the complex relation between ideology and terror goes to the heart of Arendt’s account of ‘the *event* of totalitarian domination itself’ (ibid.: 405). I will explore the important relation between ideology and terror below. Firstly, however, I would like to make certain preliminary observations about Arendt’s reasons for emphasising the ‘function’, rather than the distinct contents of various totalitarian ideologies, for one of the most persistent criticisms of Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism is that she disregards the important differences, notably, between the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies.

### *Ideology: Eliding the great left-right divide*

Arendt’s analysis of ideology in *Origins* engages with the complex interplay between nineteenth century European anti-Semitism, race-thinking and imperialism, a perspective that has attracted the charge of ‘Eurocentrism’. The broadly European context of *Origins* is a function of its historical and theoretical subject matter, rather than evidence either of historical bias or of an indifference to the violence wrought on non-European societies. For better or worse, Europe’s global hegemony was a fact of its imperial reach and economic power. Arendt emphasises throughout that modern European imperialism was distinct from both classical empire building and assimilationist conquest. Instead, the European powers subjected conquered territories and peoples to a novel form of colonial administration, that was quite distinct from, and subordinate to, the domestic institutions of the imperial powers (Arendt 1979: 130-2). Arendt’s analysis of European ‘colonial imperialism’ thus weaves a complex tale of some of the key trends and events in European history that were coincident with the disintegration of the nation-state, a process that contained within itself ‘nearly all the elements necessary for the subsequent rise of the totalitarian movements and governments’ (ibid.: xxi). The argument mounted by some critics, that Arendt’s



extensive analysis of anti-Semitism points to an imbalance between her analyses of Nazism and Stalinism overlooks an underlying strategy of Arendt's book, for what she is attempting to do is to chart the transformation of nineteenth century ideologies into fully-fledged totalitarian ideologies. Having brutally suppressed its imperial domain and twice unleashed world war it is, Arendt argues, precisely in Europe that 'a new political principle' was most urgently to be sought, one that would complement a 'new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity' (ibid.: ix).

Against this historical and theoretical backdrop, the third and final part of *Origins* takes up the question of totalitarianism *per se*. The whole question of totalitarianism seems first to be intimated in Arendt's essays of 1944, at a time when Germany's military defeat was a foregone conclusion, whereas the full extent of its mass crimes remained hidden. Moreover, whereas Arendt's focus shifted to the Soviet Union in the early stages of the Cold War, this was true of most observers and theorists, irrespective of their political views and ideological biases. While many Western Marxists earnestly debated Stalin's putative Marxist credentials, Arendt was more interested in what the Stalinist dictatorship was actually doing rather than what it said it was doing. With the benefit of hindsight, it is indeed striking that very few Western intellectuals were troubled by the relation between terror and ideology in the Stalinist system of government, which constituted the central focus of Arendt's analysis. The absence in *Origins* of a sustained analysis of the fraught relationship between Marx's thought and Stalin's totalitarian ideology is indicative of Arendt's view that Stalinism was not principally a problem for Marxist theory. Instead, she focuses on the perceived manifestation of a phenomenon with which Hitler had just acquainted Europe and much of the world. For a world at war was preoccupied with defeating the Nazi regime, of which far more was known, both during the war and throughout the entire post-war era, than with the sprawling Soviet behemoth. But even the Nazi terror enjoyed little attention from academics in the immediate post-war years, the energies of a few dedicated researchers notwithstanding. Although this phenomenon is not unrelated to the fragmentary evidence of the extermination machine that had once existed in occupied Europe, it cannot be wholly explained in these terms.

Arendt's concerns, then, were of an altogether different order than the polemics on either side of the post-war ideological divide. In her view, both the proponents

and critics of the Stalinist phenomenon failed to grasp the sheer novelty of Soviet totalitarianism and hence neither side in the ongoing controversy understood what was at stake, theoretically and politically, in the Cold War conflict. Debate especially in the Western academy revolved around the question of Stalin's Marxist credentials, whereas his regime of terror was more often than not hijacked for propaganda purposes. Arendt's approach was both more balanced and nuanced. On the one hand, she dismissed the notion of a direct line of descent between Marx's political thought and Stalinist totalitarianism. On the other hand, however, she acknowledged the Enlightenment inspiration of Bolshevik ideals, whilst nonetheless arguing that Lenin had perverted the ideals for which he had fought. This complex link between Lenin's ideals and Marx's thought and Lenin's construction of an apparatus of terror that was to be the defining feature of the Stalin years, is a major subtext of Arendt's post-*Origins* philosophical inquiry. In Arendt's view, the absence of any such link between Nazism and the Enlightenment was manifest. Moreover, she took to task all those commentators who equated Nazism and Fascism, for in her view they thereby grossly underestimated the novelty and virulence of Hitler's ideology and system of rule. *Origins* owes much of its emphasis upon Nazism to this concern, which also entailed refuting a direct line of descent between Europe's history of Church-inspired anti-Semitism and Nazi race ideology – an approach that earned Arendt quite a number of enemies. If the Dreyfus affair in late nineteenth century France affirmed the potential that Jew-hatred held as the motor of annihilation, that potential was actualised only once a totalitarian movement had seized upon biological racism as the organising concept of its ideology.

Arendt's totalitarianism thesis has been targeted most especially by those writing in the Marxist tradition. In my view, the reasons for this are not difficult to fathom. Those loyal to the Bolshevik revolutionary project were forced either to abandon their revolutionary ideals to the Stalinist involution, or to concede that the revolution had failed. Since Arendt clearly viewed the Bolshevik Revolution as a failure, her critics were wont to dismiss her views as indicative of her ignorance of Soviet politics and history at best. Arendt was neither a historian nor a specialist in Russian history. Nevertheless, Arendt makes a convincing case for a comparative analysis of the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, even if it would be more than a generation before many of her erstwhile critics would grudgingly (and as we shall see in the next chapter, also often unwittingly) concede that she had grasped the essential dynamic of Stalinist rule. *Origins*, therefore, is not a

work of history, but a study of the nature of totalitarian ideologies, the emergence of totalitarian movements, and their transformation as governing parties. Only if we grasp her general approach does it become possible to integrate her arguments in the first two parts of *Origins* with the third part dealing with totalitarianism *per se*. In short, Arendt would like us to see that just as Hitler's biological racism constituted a fundamental break with nineteenth century anti-Semitism and race doctrines, Stalin cannot simply be viewed merely as consolidating Lenin's revolutionary dictatorship, but that he in fact radically transformed it. What I think is important here is the sense in which any 'idea', once seized upon by a totalitarian movement, becomes the basis not only of its ideology but also of its total reorganisation of society.

Arendt could not have known in detail the course of events in the Soviet Union any more than her Western colleagues did. Still, there was sufficient evidence of mass terror for any fair-minded observer to conclude that the self-image of the dictatorship was hardly an appropriate basis upon which to write history, still less to make judgements about the nature of Bolshevik rule. It also needs to be stressed that Arendt held a concept of totalitarian ideology that was not principally concerned with the 'content' of the ideology, but with its function within the totalitarian system of rule. Although ideologies are not unique to totalitarian regimes, they perform a very particular function.

### *Ideologies*

Arendt defines ideologies as 'isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise' (ibid.: 468). Although these 'isms' can be traced to the worldviews and ideologies of the nineteenth century, they are not in themselves totalitarian. Still, by force of historical events and social trends, racism and communism had come to dominate the ideological landscape of twentieth century Europe. Arendt argues that neither ideology was any more totalitarian than the many non-starters, which either lacked an appreciable following or did not possess a sufficient degree of popular resonance. Nonetheless, all ideologies have totalitarian 'elements' and become totalitarian only insofar as they are mobilised by a totalitarian movement and transformed into instruments of totalitarian domination (ibid.: 470). In their totalitarian forms, racism and communism became political weapons and devices of rule. Hence, Nazi

*... race ideology was no longer a matter of mere opinion or argument or even*

*fanaticism, but constituted the actual living reality ... The Nazis, as distinguished from other racists, did not so much believe in the truth of racism as desire to change the world into a race reality. (Arendt 1954a: 351; emphasis added)*

Similarly, Stalin transformed Lenin's dictatorship of a vanguard party into a terror regime targeting all social layers and remnants of classes that had survived the first decade of Bolshevik rule, therewith realising, 'albeit in an unexpected form, the ideological socialist belief about dying classes' (ibid.: 351). Seized by totalitarian movements as templates of a future perfect, ideological systems of belief are transformed into deductive principles of action. Whereas the axiomatic 'idea' underpinning these ideologies varies, in practice the 'ideas' of race or class perform the same organising and reductive function and are therefore virtually interchangeable. Of course historically the distinction between race- and class-thinking is of great relevance, determining, *inter alia*, the primary victims of the terror. Arendt acknowledges that Nazi ideology was historically unprecedented and perhaps also uniquely destructive insofar as it tended by its very nature to be genocidal. Stalin's terror, although more complex and ideologically fraught than the Nazi regime of terror, proved to be no less destructive for those reasons.

Les Adler and Thomas Patterson long ago challenged Arendt for 'avoiding' what they term

*... the important distinction between one system proclaiming a humanistic ideology and failing to live up to its ideal and the other living up to its antihumanistic and destructive ideology only too well. (Adler and Paterson 1970: 1049)*

In other words, the authors wish to stress the supposed Marxist pedigree of Stalin's ideology, an approach that has the no doubt unintended effect of impeaching Marx's philosophy rather than demonstrating the humanist content, or even intent, of Stalin's rather bloody path to enlightenment. Whereas these critics distinguish between two ostensibly unrelated systems of ideas, Arendt was more concerned to explain how it was that Stalin transformed Lenin's one-party dictatorship into a totalitarian dictatorship, and why Stalin's terror regime cannot be portrayed merely as a failure to live up to Bolshevik revolutionary ideals. In her view, the premise of all such argumentation – that Stalin somehow unleashed successive waves of terror in order to achieve humanist ideals – betrays an unwillingness to face up to the true nature of Stalin's rule.

Others, such as Robert Tucker, charge Arendt with misreading the apparent close relation between Stalinism and the general category of 'communist ideology'. Tucker acknowledges Arendt's concept of totalitarian ideology and concedes Arendt's view that the totalitarian dictator fulfils a largely functional role in the totalitarian regime, as the initiator and driving force behind the practice of totalitarian terror. Tucker nonetheless posits a category of the paranoid 'personality type' of the totalitarian dictator (Tucker 1965: 564), arguing that if Stalin's terror was a function of his 'paranoid personality',

*... then the explanations of totalitarian terror in terms of functional requisites of totalitarianism as a system or a general ideological fanaticism in the ruling elite would appear to have been basically erroneous - a conclusion which derives further strength from the fact that the ruling elite in post-Stalin Russia remains committed to the Communist ideology. (ibid.: 571)*

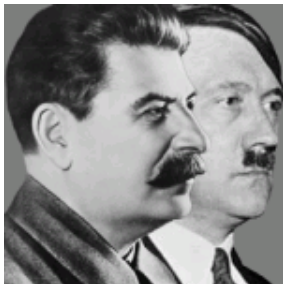
The problem with this interpretation is twofold. Firstly, Tucker implies a degree of continuity between the ruling elites under Stalin and during the post-Stalin era that is contradicted by the evidence of the decimation of Stalin's inner-circle immediately following his death. For Arendt, moreover, the 'ruling elite' in totalitarian dictatorships is not coterminous with the formal state or party hierarchies, but consists of the dictator's 'inner-circle' whose control of the levers of power is dependent on the unpredictable calculations of the Leader, who presides over a 'fluctuating hierarchy' that keeps 'the organisation in a state of fluidity' (Arendt 1979: 368, 369). The pecking-order within this inner-circle, as well as of the movement more generally, is determined by the dictator. It follows that any change of leadership would potentially dramatically alter the nature of the regime itself.

Secondly, Tucker does not define 'Communist ideology'; he merely argues that Stalin 'wove' his private vision of reality

*... into the pre-existing Marxist-Leninist ideology during the show trials of 1936-1938, which for Stalin were a dramatization of his conspiracy view of Soviet and contemporary world history. The original party ideology was thus transformed according to Stalin's own dictates into the highly 'personalized' new version of Soviet ideology. (Tucker 1965: 568)*

In other words, Tucker displaces the functions of total terror and ideology onto

the person of the dictator, who is after all the author of both. There is common ground here between Tucker and Arendt, but there is also a fundamental disagreement. Clearly any form of dictatorship is by definition highly 'personalised' and it is notoriously difficult to assess the impact on any given dictatorship of the personal motives and personality traits of the dictator. Tucker may well be right that 'paranoia' played an important role in both dictatorships. Still, we can no more think our way into Stalin's mind than we can into Hitler's. But we can examine the nature of their dictatorships and analyse the role played in both by formal state structures, ideology, terror, and so on. In other words, it would seem obvious that neither Hitler nor Stalin was 'rational', insofar as their political decisions were solely determined by their ideological preconceptions and 'paranoid' tendencies. Still, if 'paranoia' did play a key role in the mass crimes of their dictatorships, and even if it is a distinguishing criterion of totalitarian rule, the nature of a dictatorship is not simply an extension of the personality of the dictator.



Stalin - Hitler

### *Revolutionary and totalitarian dictatorship*

It falls to Tucker to explain the relevance of his observation of the post-Stalin regime's continued commitment to the 'Communist ideology', when he nonetheless adopts Arendt's distinction between Lenin's 'revolutionary dictatorship' and Stalin's 'totalitarian dictatorship' (ibid.: 556). Tucker, moreover, draws a distinction between 'dictatorial terror' and 'totalitarian terror' (ibid.: 561) and in an earlier article makes the same case for Stalin's organisational innovations, arguing that 'what we carelessly call "the Soviet political system" is best seen and analysed as a historical succession of political systems [Leninist, Stalinist, and post-Stalinist] within a broadly continuous *institutional* framework' (Tucker 1961b: 381; emphasis added). But if Stalin's dictatorship was both organisationally and ideologically distinct from both antecedent and successor regimes, moreover introducing 'totalitarian terror', the 'ruling elite's' 'continued'

commitment to 'Communist ideology' could only be interpreted as a renewed commitment to Marxist-Leninism, purged of Stalin's 'personalised' reworking of the 'pre-existing' doctrine and accompanied by the abandonment of his system of rule. To be clear on this point, it is not my intention here to refute Tucker's view that we need to better understand the personality type of the totalitarian dictator, if such a thing is possible. Nevertheless, Tucker cannot elevate the personality of the dictator, Stalin, to a position of primacy, argue that Stalinist ideology and terror were distinctively totalitarian, and simultaneously claim that the process of detotalitarianization following Stalin's death belies the continuity of the ruling elite's Communist ideology - without drawing the implicit conclusion. Either Stalin's personal rule was totalitarian, or it was not. Either post-Stalin Communist ideology was also Stalin's ideology, or it was not. In other words, either totalitarian rule came to a (virtual) end with the dictator's death, or it was never truly tied to the person of the dictator in the first place.**[xv]** Arendt consistently rejects the view that totalitarianism can be understood in terms merely of personalising the evil of the regime. This is particularly evident in her analysis of the novel organisational devices of totalitarian rule.**[xvi]** She nonetheless does insist upon the central role of the dictator in all totalitarian regimes, although she views Hitler and Stalin as a new breed of dictator. Moreover, she recognises the sheer force of will that drove these men along their chosen trajectories,**[xvii]** and her account does suggest that the regimes they created disintegrated upon their deaths. But we have only the Stalinist case as evidence of this, since Hitler's death coincided with Nazi Germany's total defeat and occupation.

If Arendt's concept of totalitarian ideology is often misinterpreted, nonetheless the mainstream anti-Marxist camp was never quite reconciled to the view that the Stalinist dictatorship faithfully reflected the project of emancipation that Marx, especially in his more youthful writings, had envisaged. Still, both sides to the Cold War dispute exploited Stalin's putative Marxist credentials for propaganda purposes. Western anti-Communist propaganda seized upon Stalin's supposed faithful adherence to Marxist doctrine as evidence that Marxism is inherently terroristic. Western Marxists, and especially adherents of the so-called 'New Left' during the 1960s, clung to the notion of a historically determined transition to true democracy. This indefinitely-postponed future provided a foil for challenging any attempt to critique the actually existing practices in the Soviet Union, which in the case of the Stalinist period were more often than not simply denied, and in subsequent years subjected to tortuous and inconclusive historical and doctrinal

debates. In that sense, writing in the late 1940s to early 1950s, Arendt was challenging an impregnable edifice of denial, itself a function of the circus going on in Washington at the time. Arendt rightly dismissed both sides as ideologically blinkered and intellectually dishonest, stressing not only that which was known about Stalin's terror but also his relation to the Marxist-Leninist tradition, to which he laid claim but to which he also did extreme violence. Marxism was an alibi rather than a basis of Stalin's political programme, and if he paid little more than lip service to the ideals of the Bolshevik revolutionary programme itself, there were few pre-war Western Marxists willing unambiguously and unconditionally to point this out, not least of all to themselves. Still, Arendt's central point was that the Nazi and Stalinist systems of government were comparable, and that their ideologies, although clearly distinct, were important not for their presumed content, but instead for their narrow political function. This is a view echoed, for example, by Martin Broszat who similarly argues that the comparative analysis of the National Socialist and Stalinist systems of government is theoretically justified, despite important differences between their societies and ideologies (Institut 1980: 35).

Arendt challenges the thesis of a continuity between Marx's thought and Stalin's ideology, whilst nonetheless highlighting the totalitarian elements of Marxism-Leninism that formed the basis of Stalinism, without collapsing the former into the latter. This was bound to be controversial. The purpose of this essay has been to stress Arendt's general approach rather than to provide an in-depth analysis of her controversial view that Stalin fundamentally transformed the system of government spawned by the Bolshevik Revolution. In the following section, I will analyse Arendt's even more controversial contention that rather than their content, totalitarian ideologies are principally distinguished by their function in the establishment of a regime of total domination.

*Read Part Two:* <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=3115>

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## NOTES

i. Auschwitz and Majdanek were unique insofar as they also served as concentration and slave labour camps. Moreover, Auschwitz belonged to the largest industrial complex in all of occupied Europe, and it was composed of three main camps: the original concentration camp, Auschwitz I; Auschwitz II or



Birkenau, the largest of the camps and the centre of extermination; and Auschwitz III or Monowitz, which was a dedicated slave labour camp directly attached to the industrial installations. During the immediate post-war years, the dedicated extermination camps of the *Aktion Reinhard* programme – Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec – were much less frequently mentioned. This was because they were comparatively small operations that were entirely dismantled prior to the Soviet invasion, and because very few inmates of these camps survived. Unlike Auschwitz, these camps were distinguished by their secret locations and the majority of their staff managed to escape arrest in the immediate post-war years. Nevertheless, the story of the belated acknowledgement of the existence of these camps is somewhat puzzling. For in 1942, reports in the English-language newspaper *Polish Fortnightly Review*, published by the Polish government-in-exile, repeatedly referred to these camps as ‘extermination facilities’. Moreover, the exiled Polish government advised its Allied counterparts of the mass extermination of the Jews by no later than December 1942. Mass exterminations began later in Auschwitz than in the other dedicated death camps, whereas reports about ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Birkenau’ during 1943 failed to register that these were two sub-camps of the greater Auschwitz complex. This link was first conclusively established in a June 1944 report of the Jewish Agency in Geneva, which cited eyewitness accounts by Rudi Vrba and Alfred Wetzlar, who had escaped from Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944. There were other, and earlier, first-hand accounts. Thus the Polish underground published the first book on Auschwitz, *Oboz Smierci* (Camp of Death), in 1942, prior to the commencement of mass killings, whereas throughout 1943 a steady stream of information about the camp’s various activities was transmitted by the Polish resistance (Van Pelt 2002: 144-5).

**ii.** The charge that *Origins* fails to make an adequate case for the comparative analysis of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism will be dealt with in chapter five (see also De Mildt 1996; Browning 1995).

**iii.** As we have seen, *Origins* certainly was not, as Walter Laqueur claims, ‘the first in the field’, a claim made in the same paragraph in which he notes that ‘during the previous decade others had pointed to the specific character of totalitarianism – Ernst Fraenkel and Franz Neumann, Waldemar Gurian and Franz Borkenau, Boris Souvarine, Rudolf Hilferding, and others, including Russian writers such as Georgi Fyodotov’ (Laqueur 2001: 51).

**iv.** Arendt’s post-war analysis characterises this murderous imperialistic impulse as a product of totalitarian rulers who typically ‘consider the country where they

happened to seize power only the temporary headquarters of the international movement on the road to world conquest, that they reckon victories and defeats in terms of centuries or millennia, and that global interests always overrule the local interests of their own territory' (Arendt 1979: 411).

**v.** In view of the scope and complexity of Arendt's subject matter, it is indeed puzzling how Walter Laqueur could claim that 'what was new and ingenious in Arendt's book was not relevant to her topic – the long and far-fetched discourses on the Dreyfus trial and French anti-Semitism, on D'Israeli, Cecil Rhodes, Lawrence of Arabia, and British imperialism – for it was not in these countries that totalitarianism came to power' (Laqueur 2001: 51). The radicalising impact of the Dreyfus affair; the distinction between social and religious anti-Semitism and biological racism; the impact of imperialism on Europe's national states; and the mentality of figures such as Rhodes – he would 'colonise the planets' – all of these are irrelevant to the First World War that spawned Europe's inter-war radicalism and her ideologies of *Lebensraum* and world revolution?

**vi.** Having articulated this view in *Origins*, Arendt turned to a study of the 'Totalitarian Elements of Marxism', which she never completed, but whose themes were incorporated notably in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, as well as in several important essays and lectures. At a time when it was quite unheard of in America, Arendt argued that Marxism is inextricably bound up with the chief tenets of Western political philosophy.

**vii.** Schmitt distinguishes between the ancient *polis* and the state proper, which emerged in sixteenth century Europe in the wake of the Renaissance, humanism, Reformation and counter-Reformation; a product of 'neutralising' and 'secularising' occidental rationalism on the one hand (Schmitt 1988a: 271; also Schmitt 1991: 19), and on the other monarchical absolutism, which centralised political power and forged a unified, post-feudal state (Schmitt 1978: 204). If we recall, Schmitt presents the key transitions in modern European history in schematic terms as a series of successive 'dominant spheres', corresponding to the progressive secularisation of the European state. Hence, the theology and metaphysics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively, was followed by the eighteenth century world of humanism and rationalism, which in turn gave way to the 'economism' characteristic of the nineteenth century (Schmitt 1993: 130-4). He argues that the secularisation of the public sphere coincided with both the triumph of the 'natural' sciences and the emergence of the liberal *Rechtstaat*, in the wake of the French Revolution. The secular institutions of the liberal state grew out of a popular yearning for a free realm of

public debate and exchange, which would underpin the state's political authority and inform its decision-making processes. However, two forces now emerged to undermine both the political neutrality of the state and the bourgeois social contract, which presupposed both the social and economic hegemony of the enfranchised and ideologically coherent middle classes and the relegation of social and economic questions to the depoliticised sphere of civil society. Thus, the division of labour, which was introduced by the process of industrialisation, was accompanied by the democratisation of society. The resulting social cleavages gave rise to extra-parliamentary corporate structures and associations, whose 'politicisation' undermined the sovereign political authority of the state (Schmitt 1928: 151-2). Thus, the classic liberal state was transformed into a weak, interventionist, quantitatively total state, whose role was restricted to mediating between society's organised interests and parties.

**viii.** Arendt's focus in the review is Western Europe. Nevertheless, she notes that 'all one party systems follow the basic pattern of "movements"' (Arendt 1946c: 209), an implicit reference to her characteristic distinction between totalitarian movements and totalitarian regimes. Whereas the Fascist, Bolshevik, and Nazi parties all constituted totalitarian movements, it was only under the rule of Hitler and Stalin that totalitarian rule finally took hold.

**ix.** Arendt's interest in Cecil Rhodes centred on his claim that 'I would annex the planets if I could' (Arendt 1979: 124), an ambition Arendt never doubted.

**x.** In the 1954 article 'Dream and Nightmare' Arendt notes Hitler's pre-war 'promise that he would liquidate Europe's obsolete nation-state system and build a united Europe' (Arendt 1954e: 417).

**xi.** In this post-war exchange with Eric Voegelin, Arendt introduces key themes of the 1958 work, *The Human Condition*. She argues that the plight of the modern masses revolves around the destruction of binding common interests that are the basis of human solidarity. Without this '*inter-est*' both bringing together and distinguishing them as individuals, the atomised masses fall prey to totalitarian 'consolidation'. Hence Arendt's view that that totalitarianism 'is identical with a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before' (Arendt 1953c: 408).

**xii.** It is not clear how Heller would account for Soviet totalitarianism, which emerged in a society that could hardly have been described either as Western or 'modern', in Heller's sense of that term.

**xiii.** See Young-Bruehl's discussion of Waldemar Gurian and David Riesman's sense that *Origins* might imply 'the inevitability of totalitarianism' (Young-Bruehl

1982: 251).

**xiv.** Arendt's reflections on Cecil Rhodes and T. E. Lawrence draw on her interpretation Franz Kafka, whose interpretation of bureaucracy and the modern administrative regime influenced Arendt's notion of 'pre-totalitarian' rule and her understanding of the dynamics of modern mass movements (see e.g. Arendt 1979: 245; Arendt 1944a; see Danoff 2000).

**xv.** Different problems present themselves in another of Tucker's articles of 1961, in which he claims that Arendt never definitively distinguished the Leninist and Stalinist regimes, but instead implies that 'the communist political system, established by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, *is what it became* after Stalin revolutionized it and transformed it into a Stalinist political system' (Tucker 1961a: 282). In fact, Arendt argues quite the contrary, rejecting a teleological interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution as inherently totalitarian (see e.g. Arendt 1953e: 364-7). Her point, to put it in vulgar terms, is that Stalin needn't have happened, although he or someone like him would probably not have been elected Prime Minister of Britain (see Arendt 1979: 308).

**xvi.** See Arendt's incisive comparative description of Hitler's and Stalin's functions as 'the Leader' in relation to the organisational imperatives of their totalitarian movements (1979: 373-81).

**xvii.** See e.g. Arendt's analysis of *Hitler's Table Talk* (1951: 291-5).

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In September 2011, *Professor Anthony Court* of the College of Graduate Studies was awarded the UNISA Press, *Hidding Currie* prize for 2010. The Hidding Currie prize is awarded annually for academic or artistic work of the highest quality

which contributes to the understanding or development of the discipline. Professor Court's book, entitled *"Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of Her Times"*, was published in 2008 by Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam, and republished by UNISA Press in 2009. The book appeared in the bi-national SAVUSA Series, which aims to publish scientific, yet broadly accessible texts on historical and contemporary issues.

Professor Court's interest in Hannah Arendt's political thought grew out of his undergraduate studies in political philosophy and international relations at Munich University's Geschwister Scholl Institute in the 1980s. During this period, there was a resurgent interest in Arendt's political thought generally and her theory of totalitarianism more particularly. The author notes that Arendt's novel contributions to twentieth century political thought resist easy categorisation. Nevertheless, in his view there are few thinkers in Western history who share Arendt's unwavering sense for the political. A central argument of the book is that Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and her theory of politics can be traced back to her personal experience of the twentieth century phenomenon of "total domination". Although much of Arendt's early writings consist of reflections upon the harrowing phenomena of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, "total war" and genocide, Arendt's later works articulate a pluralistic theory of politics that is grounded in her concept of "natality". In Arendt's own words, new "beginnings" are without end, and each new beginning "is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man".

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# Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism - Part Two



*Hannah Arendt - Ills. Ingrid Bouws*

## *Ideology and terror: The experiment in total domination*

In chapter two of *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of her Time* it was argued that Arendt's typology of government rests on the twin criteria of organisational form and a corresponding 'principle of action'. In the post-*Origins* essay *On the Nature of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that Western political thought has customarily distinguished between 'lawful' and 'lawless', or 'constitutional' and 'tyrannical' forms of government (Arendt 1954a: 340). Throughout Occidental history, lawless forms of government, such as tyranny, have been regarded as perverted by definition. Hence, if

*... the essence of government is defined as lawfulness, and if it is understood that laws are the stabilizing forces in the public affairs of men (as indeed it always has been since Plato invoked Zeus, the god of the boundaries, in his Laws), then the problem of movement of the body politic and the actions of its citizens arises. (Arendt 1979: 466-7)*

'Lawfulness' as a corollary of constitutional forms of government is a negative criterion inasmuch as it prescribes the limits to but cannot explain the motive force of human actions: 'the greatness, but also the perplexity of laws in free societies is that they only tell what one should not, but never what one should do' (ibid.: 467). Arendt, accordingly, lays great store by Montesquieu's discovery of the 'principle of action' ruling the actions of both government and governed: 'virtue' in a republic, 'honour' in monarchy, and 'fear' in tyrannical forms of government (Arendt 1954a: 330; Arendt 1979: 467-8).



In all non-totalitarian systems of government, therefore, the principle of action is a guide to individual actions, although fear in tyranny is 'precisely despair over the impossibility of action'

since tyranny destroys the public realm of politics and is therefore anti-political by definition. Nevertheless, the state of 'isolation' and 'impotence' experienced by the individual in tyrannical forms of government springs from the destruction of the public realm of politics whereas the mobilisation of the 'overwhelming, combined power of all others against his own' (Arendt 1954a: 337) does not eliminate entirely a minimum of human contact in the non-political spheres of social intercourse and private life. Thus, if the fear-guided actions of the subject of tyrannical rule are bereft of the capacity to establish relations of power between individuals acting and speaking together in a public realm of politics, the 'isolation' of the political subject does not entail the destruction of his social and private relations (ibid.: 344). Therefore, in all non-totalitarian forms of government, the body politic is in constant motion within set boundaries of a stable political order, although tyranny destroys the public space of political action (Arendt 1979: 467).

Arendt argues that totalitarianism is distinguished from all historical forms of government, including tyranny, insofar as it has no use for any 'principle of action taken from the realm of human action', since the essence of its body politic is 'motion implemented by terror' (Arendt 1954a: 348; see 331-3). In other words, totalitarianism aims to eradicate entirely the human capacity to act as such (Arendt 1979: 467). For totalitarian rule targets the total life-world of its subjects, which in turn presupposes a world totally conquered by a single totalitarian movement.**[i]** Hence, only in

*... a perfect totalitarian government, where all men have become 'One Man', where all action aims at the acceleration of the movement of nature or history, where every single act is the execution of a death sentence which Nature or History has already pronounced, that is, under conditions where terror can be completely relied upon to keep the movement in constant motion, no principle of action separate from its essence would be needed at all. (ibid.)*

This important passage contains several key ideas that need to be carefully unpacked. Firstly, we encounter Arendt's conception of society reduced to 'One Man' or a single, undifferentiated Mankind as a condition of a 'perfect totalitarian government'. We may note here that totalitarianism thus conceived constitutes the very antithesis of the political in Arendt's sense of men acting and speaking together in a public realm of politics. Secondly, Arendt contends that only in such a perfect totalitarian system would terror, which she views as the 'essence' of totalitarianism, suffice to sustain totalitarian rule. Hence, in all imperfect totalitarian dictatorships, terror in its dual function as the 'essence of government and principle, not of action, but of motion' (ibid.), is an insufficient condition of totalitarian rule. For, insofar as totalitarianism has not completely eliminated all forms of spontaneous human action, freedom, or the inherent human capacity to 'make a new beginning', exists as an ever-present potential within society (ibid.: 466).**[ii]** Totalitarian movements must therefore strive to eliminate this capacity for political action, and any form of spontaneous human relations. Hence:

*What totalitarian rule needs to guide the behaviour of its subjects is a preparation to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim. This two-sided preparation, the substitute for a principle of action, is the ideology. (ibid.: 468)*

However – and this is a crucial point – Arendt stresses that it is

*... in the nature of ideological politics ... that the real content of the ideology (the working class or the Germanic peoples), which originally had brought about the 'idea' (the struggle of classes as the law of history or the struggle of races as the law of nature), is devoured by the logic with which the 'idea' is carried out. (Arendt 1979: 472)*

In other words, 'the preparation of victims and executioners which totalitarianism requires in place of Montesquieu's principle of action is not the ideology itself –



racism or dialectical materialism – but its inherent logicality’ (ibid.: 472). In Arendt’s view, the device of ‘logicality’, which underpins all ideological thought processes, draws its strength from a simple human fact; ‘it springs from our fear of contradicting ourselves’ (ibid.: 473).

Arendt’s concept of totalitarian ideology is linked to her category of totalitarian ‘lawfulness’. She argues that totalitarian rule ‘explodes’ the opposition between lawful and lawless government, since although lawless in the conventional sense that it disregards even its own positive laws, unlike tyranny, it is ‘not arbitrary insofar as it obeys with strict logic and executes with precise compulsion the laws of History or Nature’ (Arendt 1954a: 339-40). This means, for one thing, that totalitarianism is not an exaggerated version of the arbitrary and self-interested rule of the tyrant and the laws of Nature or History are not the ‘immutable *ius naturale*’ or the ‘sempiternal customs and traditions of history’, from which positive laws governing the actions of men customarily derive their authority. In its totalitarian incarnation, ‘law’ no longer signifies the stabilising legal framework governing human actions, but instead transforms individuals into the living embodiments of the laws of movement, ‘either riding atop their triumphant car or crushed under its wheels’ (ibid.: 341). Since ‘totalitarian government is only insofar as it is kept in constant motion’ (ibid.: 344), the comparatively stable positive legal framework guiding the actions of ruler and ruled within the finite territorial realm of the modern nation-state is antithetical to the requirements of a totalitarian regime. Individual subjects of totalitarian rule either surrender to the dynamic process of becoming, or they are consumed by it: “guilty” is he who stands in the path of terror, that is, who willingly or unwillingly hinders the movement of Nature or History’ (ibid.: 342). The qualification is significant, since the automatism of the impersonal and dynamic forces of Nature or History enjoy complete primacy over the individual members of society, who either join the movement or are swept away by it.

### *Ideology’s function*

Totalitarian lawfulness applies the laws of Nature or History ‘directly to the “species”, to mankind [and] if properly executed, are expected to produce as their end a single “Mankind”’ (ibid.: 340). Ideology’s function is to transform Nature and History ‘from the firm soil supporting human life and action into supra-gigantic forces whose movements race through humanity’ (ibid.: 341). This function, rather than the substance of the ideology, distinguishes totalitarian

ideologies from their antecedents in the nineteenth century. As we have seen, in the first two parts of *Origins* Arendt foregrounds the phenomena of race-thinking and class-thinking, both of which were general trends in nineteenth century European thought and politics, whereas only Marxism could lay claim to a respectable philosophical lineage. Race-thinking and racism, which interpret history as a natural contest of races, springs from the 'subterranean' currents – that is, the gutter – of European political thought (Arendt 1953f: 375). Still, both resonated with a substantial body of popular opinion and sentiment since both doctrines derived their potency and persuasive power from actual historical trends. For 'persuasion is not possible without appeal to either experiences or desires, in other words to immediate political needs' (Arendt 1979: 159).

The transition to the twentieth century coincided with the ascendancy of racism and Marxism and their emergence as the dominant ideologies in inter-war Europe, a dominance that was a function of their coincidence with the century's two most important elements of political experience; namely, 'the struggle between the races for world domination, and the struggle between the classes for political power'. Racism and communism triumphed over competing ideologies both because they reflected dominant currents in society and politics and because they were seized upon as the official ideologies of the most powerful and successful totalitarian movements (ibid.: 470). Their totalitarian character, moreover, presupposed emptying racism and revolutionary socialism of their 'utilitarian content, the interests of a class or nation' (ibid.: 348), generating a precedence of form and function over content, of infallible prediction over interest and explanation, driving 'ideological implications into extremes of logical consistency' (ibid.: 471).**[iii]** In this way, totalitarian ideologies manufactured a total explanation of reality freed of inconsistencies, unhampered by mere facts, and independent of all experience.

For Hitler, Arendt tells us, this process was set in motion by a 'supreme gift for "ice cold reasoning"', for Stalin, by the 'mercilessness of his dialectics' (ibid.); for both bespeaking a determination to effect controlled changes in human nature as the primary impediment to total domination. Total domination, in turn, guided by totalitarian ideology and actualised by the application of terror, invariably results 'in the same "law" of elimination of individuals for the sake of the process or progress of the species' (Arendt 1954a: 341). Nevertheless, whereas the application of terror is initially aimed at eliminating opposition, total terror also

serves the important function of 'stabilising' men to permit the unhindered movement of Nature or History, eliminating 'individuals for the sake of the species' and sacrificing 'men for the sake of mankind' (ibid.: 343). Having discovered the laws of motion of totalitarian ideologies – that is, having mastered the intricacies of totalitarian organisation –, the dictator eliminates all obstacles to the fulfilment of the objective laws of movement. Unlike the tyrant, who, as a 'free agent', imposes his arbitrary subjective will, the totalitarian ruler acts in accordance with the logic inherent in the idea, freely submitting to his function as

*... the executioner of laws higher than himself. The Hegelian definition of Freedom as insight into and conforming to 'necessity' has here found a new and terrifying realisation. For the imitation or interpretation of these laws, the totalitarian ruler feels that only one man is required and that all other persons, all other minds as well as wills, are strictly superfluous. (Arendt 1954a: 346)*

In the popular attraction of totalitarian ideologies, which derives from their all-encompassing explanation of life and the world, secures the leader in his role as 'the functionary of the masses he leads' (Arendt 1979: 325). Once seized upon by totalitarian movements, notions of a classless society or a master race presuppose 'dying classes' and 'unfit races'. The 'monstrous logicity' inherent in such ideological constructs dictates that whosoever accepts their initial premise but does not draw the logical conclusion of exterminating 'class enemies' or 'inferior races', is 'plainly either stupid or a coward' (ibid.: 471, 472). Still, without the Leader's genuine gift for mobilising the masses and implementing the novel methods of totalitarian organisation, ideological intent could not be translated into historical reality. Thus, despite the fact that neither Hitler nor Stalin added anything of substance to the ideologies which they adopted, it is they who discovered the principle of logical process which 'like a mighty tentacle seizes you on all sides as in a vise and from whose grip you are powerless to tear yourself away; you must either surrender or make up your mind to utter defeat' (Stalin in ibid.: 472).

If Arendt regards neither class-thinking nor race-thinking as inherently totalitarian, this is because any ideology or system of ideas, insofar as it is articulated as a definite theoretical or political doctrine or formulated as a party program, is incompatible with totalitarianism. For doctrines and programs, like positive laws, set limits, establish boundaries, and introduce stability (ibid.: 159, 324, 325). Nevertheless, all ideologies have totalitarian 'elements', for every

ideology adopts an 'axiomatically accepted premise' that forms the basis of a logically or dialectically constructed argument, whose absolute consistency is a function of its complete emancipation from all observable facts, contrary evidence or life experience (ibid.: 470, 471). This is a crucial aspect of Arendt's argument, for she stresses that the 'arrogant emancipation from reality and experience' points to the nexus between ideology and terror characteristic of all totalitarian regimes, and accounting for their unprecedented destructive power. The key to unlocking this power resides in the totalitarian organisation of society. Freed of the customary standards of lawful action and verifiable truth claims, totalitarian movements unleash terror in accordance with the imperatives of the ideological reconfiguration of society. All members of society are now the potential targets of a regime of terror that functions independently of both the interests of society and its members (Arendt 1954a: 350).

### *Ideology and terror*



Hannah  
Arendt  
Plaque in  
Marburg

The link thus established between ideology and terror, although only realised by totalitarian organisation, is nonetheless implicit in all forms of ideology, for ideology 'is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea' and it treats the course of history in all its contingency and complexity as a function of the 'logical exposition of its "idea"'.**[iv]** The strict logicity with which an ideological argument is extrapolated from an axiological premise is termed 'totalitarian lawfulness' by Arendt. Thus the 'ideas' of race and class 'never form the subject matter of the ideologies and the suffix *-logy* never indicates simply a body of "scientific" statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change' (Arendt 1979: 469) – the 'idea', that is, as instrumental in calculating the course of events. Ideology in this sense is a strictly

closed system of thought since the vagaries and contingencies of history are presumed to be subject to an overarching, 'consistent movement' of history which can explain all contradictions and resolve all difficulties 'in the manner of mere argumentation' (ibid.: 470).

All ideologies therefore appeal to a putative 'scientificity' that purports to reveal the motor of history with the same precision and logical consistency to be found in the natural sciences. Arendt stresses, however, that the scientificity of ideological thinking is distinct from "'scientism" in politics [that] still presupposes that human welfare is its object, a concept that is utterly alien to totalitarianism'. Thus 'modern utilitarianism', whether socialist or positivist, is imbued with the interests of class or nation (ibid.: 347) and strives to either transform the outside world or bring about a 'revolutionizing transmutation of society'. The evaluation of interest as an omnipresent force in history, together with the assumption that power is subject to discoverable objective laws, collectively constitute the core of utilitarian doctrines. Totalitarian ideologies, on the other hand, aim to transform human nature itself (ibid.: 458, also 440), since the human condition of plurality is the greatest obstacle standing in the way of the realisation of an ideologically consistent universe. For a view of history as a logical and consistent process of becoming, set in motion by a movement which is the expression of the 'idea' and which is unaffected by external forces, dispenses with the 'freedom inherent in man's capacity to think' embracing, instead, the 'straight jacket of logic' (ibid.: 470). Thus, the 'logicality of ideological thinking' is both a template of an imagined society as well as the motor of a regime of terror, which is both means and end. Once seized upon by a totalitarian government, ideologies form the basis of all political action, not only guiding the actions of the government but also rendering these actions 'tolerable to the ruled population' (Arendt 1954a: 349). In this sense, ideology facilitates the extraction of 'consent' from the members of society whose standards of judgement are wholly informed by a closed system of thought and whose actions, or inaction, are judged solely by the requirements of the 'objective laws of motion'.

The transformation of ideologies into fully fledged totalitarian ideologies is thus a crucial prerequisite of totalitarian rule. Anti-Semitism, for example, only becomes ideological in Arendt's sense once it presumes to explain 'the whole course of history as being secretly manoeuvred by the Jews', rather than merely expressing a hatred of Jews. Similarly, socialism *qua* ideology 'pretends that all history is a

struggle of classes, that the proletariat is bound by eternal laws to win this struggle, that a classless society will then come about, and that the state, finally, will wither away'. By stripping away contingency and human agency as determinants of history, totalitarian ideologies point to irresistible forces that allegedly disclose the true course of events, past and future, 'without further concurrence with actual experience' (Arendt 1954a: 349). Totalitarianism's 'supersense' construes all factuality as fabricated, therewith eliminating the ground for distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Guided by ideology and goaded by terror, human beings lose their innately human capacity for spontaneity and action, which is to say their capacity for political discourse and the distinctly human capacity for creative and unconstrained thought (ibid.: 350).

Arendt argues that totalitarian rulers employ a deceptively simple device for transforming ideologies into coercive instruments: 'they take them dead seriously' (Arendt 1979: 471; Arendt 1954a: 350). This statement might seem self-evident, even trite. Yet Arendt means by this two very important points. Firstly, she contends that neither Hitler nor Stalin contributed anything of substance to racism and socialism respectively. Their importance as ideologists stems from their understanding the political utility of eliminating ideological complexity, by means of which they transform ideologies into 'political weapons'. Conversely, the Leader's image of 'infallibility', as propagated by the party, hinges on his pretence at being the mere agent of the ideological laws of Nature or History. The Leader reinforces this image by means of a simple but effective ruse, for it is customary for the Leader to reverse the relation of cause and effect by proclaiming political intent in the guise of a 'prophecy'. Thus, for example, when Hitler in 1939 'prophesied' that in the event of another world war the Jews of Europe would be 'annihilated', he was in fact announcing that there would be another world war and that the Jews would be annihilated. Thus, political intent concealed as "'prophecy" becomes a retrospective alibi' (Arendt 1979: 349): the realisation of this 'prophecy' has the effect of reinforcing the Leader's image of infallibility. [v] Similarly, when in 1930 Stalin identified 'dying classes' as the central threat to the consolidation of Bolshevik power, he was in fact merely identifying the targets of the coming purges. From this point of view the content of the ideology and its substance – the prophecies of 'dying classes' and 'unfit races' – are indeed of consequence insofar as they reveal the Leader's political intentions by identifying the groups to be targeted by the regime's terror. The 'language of prophetic scientificity' (ibid.: 350) also answers to the needs of

disoriented and displaced masses, whose insecurity renders them susceptible to all-encompassing explanations of life and the world and whose membership of mass political movements releases them from the vagaries of an indeterminate fate (ibid.: 352, 368, 381).

### *Propaganda*

Arendt wishes us to see that the totalitarian Leader's ideological fervour has nothing to do with the fidelity of ideological discourse and everything to do with eliminating ideological complexity, which is antithetical to the organisational needs of the movement. Ideological complexity is also an obstacle to the effectiveness of propaganda, which is distinct from ideology and serves as a recruiting device (ibid.: 343). Propaganda creates conditions in which both the movement and society can be reordered into what Hitler termed a 'living organisation' (ibid.: 361). In the pre-power phase, propaganda holds the 'real world' at bay, whose complexity and contingency continuously threatens the integrity of the movement and the internal consistency of its ideological world-view. Propaganda thus shelters the movement *qua* proto-totalitarian society from a worldly reality (ibid.: 366), attracting masses already predisposed to discounting the evidence of their senses and who are thus susceptible to the 'propaganda effect of infallibility' (ibid.: 349). Once the movement has seized power, this 'effect' is amplified by the totalitarian reorganisation of society, at which point ideology ceases to be a matter of mere opinion or 'debatable theory' (ibid.: 362). Instead, the totalitarian movement organises the members of society into a race or class reality presided over by the 'never-resting, dynamic will' of the Leader, which is the 'supreme law in all totalitarian regimes' (ibid.: 365).

Propaganda is thus principally aimed at the non-totalitarian world. Its distinctively totalitarian character is expressed 'much more frighteningly in the organisation of its followers than in the physical liquidation of its opponents' (ibid.: 364). Propaganda thus serves the organisational interests of the movement while ideology facilitates the exercise of terror, which coincides with the reorganisation of society itself. Ideology and terror are thus the instruments of a revolutionary transformation of society, since ideology identifies the victims of terror, whereas terror realises the claim 'that everything outside the movement is "dying"' (ibid.: 381). Fabrication rather than followers is the key to the success of totalitarian rule. Indeed, a community of 'believers' implies an element of fidelity that hinders the Leader's freedom of action. What is required is a complete

absence of the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality (ibid.: 385). Henceforth, factuality and reality become a matter of mere opinion, whereas the truth of lies is affirmed by the actualisation of ideological goals. Hence, not 'the passing successes of demagogy win the masses, but the visible reality and power of a "living organization"' (ibid.: 361).**[vi]** 'Prophecy' realised is its own best guarantee.

Arendt's distinction between ideologies of the nineteenth century and the totalitarian ideologies of the inter-war period remains one of the most controversial aspects of her theory of totalitarianism. Critics routinely deride Arendt's alleged 'equation' of racism and communism, whereas I have argued that the distinct contents of these ideologies is both acknowledged by Arendt and irrelevant to her focus on the functions that they fulfil 'in the apparatus of totalitarian domination' (Arendt 1979: 470). The persistence of this criticism reflects the inability of her critics to break out of a deterministic frame of reference, which always already accounts for novelty as the "'product" of antecedent causes' (Kateb 1984: 56).

Bernard Crick argues that descriptions of the formation of ideologies, the disintegration of the old systems, and 'what then happens' do not establish 'inevitable connections between them' (Crick 1979: 38). Many ideologies and political sects arising in the nineteenth century go unmentioned by Arendt. And if Arendt 'gives all too few glimpses of the nonstarters and the ideologies of the salon and the gutter that got nowhere', she is nonetheless, and

*... quite properly, writing history backward: she selects what is relevant to understanding the mentality of the Nazis and of the Communists under Stalin, and she is not writing a general account of nineteenth-century extreme political sects. (Crick 2001: 99)*



Eric  
Voegelin



In response to a comment by Eric Voegelin in his 1953 review of *Origins*, Arendt provided a clear and rare statement of her method. Voegelin had argued that the true division in the crisis of contemporary (post-war) politics is not between liberals and totalitarians but between the 'religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side, and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other side' (Voegelin in Isaac 1992: 71). Arendt's *A Reply to Eric Voegelin* is unambiguous: 'Professor Voegelin seems to think that totalitarianism is only the other side of liberalism, positivism and pragmatism. But ... liberals are clearly not totalitarians' (Arendt 1953c: 405). Arendt goes on to suggest that Voegelin's misreading is rooted in their different approaches. Where she proceeds from 'facts and events', Voegelin is guided by 'intellectual affinities and influences', a distinction perhaps blurred by Arendt's real interest in philosophical implications and shifts in spiritual self-interpretation. Nonetheless, Arendt formulates her general approach to the phenomenon of totalitarianism in quite distinct terms as follows:

*But this certainly does not mean that I described 'a gradual revelation of the essence of totalitarianism from its inchoate forms in the eighteenth century to the fully developed', because this essence, in my opinion, did not exist before it had come into being. I therefore talk only of 'elements', which eventually crystallize into totalitarianism, some of which are traceable to the eighteenth century, some perhaps even farther back ... Under no circumstances would I call any of them totalitarian. (Arendt 1953c: 405-06)*

Arendt views totalitarianism as *sui generis*. To her mind, the totalitarian phenomenon derives its great force from the 'ridiculous supersense of its ideological superstition' (Arendt 1979: 457) and 'the *event* of totalitarian domination itself' (Arendt 1953c: 405). It does not arise on the basis of a substantive ideological content nor is 'total domination' a variation of historical forms of tyranny and despotism.**[vii]**

The complexity of this point stems from Arendt's view of totalitarian ideologies as 'instruments of explanation' (Arendt 1979: 469) whose logical deduction of the movement of history from a single premise does away with the need for a guiding principle of behaviour. Totalitarian ideologies are not a system of belief guiding the actions of their adherents but an instrument exploited by totalitarian movements in their drive to mobilise the masses. Klemperer portrays National Socialism in this sense as a manifestation of the 'weariness of a generation. It

wants to be free of the necessity of leading its own life' (Klemperer 2000: 158). By answering to this need, totalitarian movements attract a following that constitutes the nucleus of a nation-wide reorganisation of society into three sub-categories of humanity, presided over by the leader – the elite formations, party members, and rank and file sympathisers. Whereas the elite formations typically evince a fanatical adherence to ideology, the mass following is characterised by malleability and gullibility (Arendt 1979: 367, 382-4). Arendt argues that the totalitarian system of rule presupposes a mass following disabused of ideals, convictions and mere opinions, since these are obstacles to the laws of motion governing the movement of history. For this reason, totalitarian education has never sought to instil convictions in the masses, but to eliminate the capacity to form any (ibid.: 468). It is also for this reason that Arendt stresses the novel *organisational* devices binding the various strata of the movement directly to its leader, and the role of terror as the substitute for a principle of action. The party membership is not expected to put much faith in the integrity of official public statements. Knowledge within the party of Hitler's serial lies inspired trust in his leadership for the simple reason that Hitler repeatedly demonstrated his ability to manipulate his domestic audience and outwit his foreign adversaries. Without 'the organizational division of the movement into elite formations, membership, and sympathizers, the lies of the Leader would not work' (ibid.: 383).

The novel form of totalitarian organisation – its peculiar 'shapelessness' – derives from an ingenious and rather simple device that results in an immense administrative and structural complexity. Whereas the division between the leader, elite formations and masses is suggestive of authoritarian state structures, political authority in totalitarian regimes radiates outwards unmediated from the leader to the various levels of institutional and party structures. Thus, although Hitler delegated enormous powers to key ministers and party and state functionaries, these powers were contained within strictly defined areas of competence and were conditional upon Hitler's continued favour. Moreover, whereas authoritarian regimes typically establish discrete institutional spheres of clearly circumscribed sovereign state authority, totalitarian rule is characterised by a multiplication of overlapping and conflicting party and state institutions that inhibit the formation of a stable, hierarchical chain of command. The concentration of power in Hitler's Chancellery was therefore a function of Hitler's sole authority to decide the outcome of conflict within and between competing party and state institutions, rather than of a centralisation of hierarchically

ordered political power.

### *Power of command*

Theoretically, this means that totalitarian regimes are resistant to conventional analytical frameworks, for all of these to some extent presuppose stabilising hierarchical structures of authority typical of military dictatorships, whose 'absolute power of command from the top down and absolute obedience from the bottom up' define these regimes as *non-totalitarian*:

*A hierarchically organized chain of command means that the commander's power is dependent on the whole hierarchic system in which he operates. Every hierarchy, no matter how authoritarian in its direction, and every chain of command, no matter how arbitrary or dictatorial the content of its orders, tends to stabilize and would have restricted the total power of the leader of a totalitarian movement. In the language of the Nazis, the never-resting, dynamic 'will of the Führer' – and not his orders, a phrase that might imply a fixed and circumscribed authority – becomes the 'supreme law' in a totalitarian state. (Arendt 1979: 364-5; see also Schmitt 1947: 431)*

The distinction between totalitarianism and tyranny or military dictatorship tells us something of the radical novelty of the former. Arendt wishes us to see that totalitarianism is fundamentally incompatible with the modern Western state, in *any* of its different forms. For all state forms are distinguished by their hierarchical structure, which rests on a principle of authority that simultaneously stabilises institutions and informs the actions of its members. In other words, the subjects of all non-totalitarian states are guided by a 'principle of action' that in one form or the other establishes limits. Even the fear-guided actions of the subjects of tyranny possess an element of calculability and predictability, whereas totalitarian regimes eliminate all immutable standards and predictable limits. A regime of terror that prepares its subjects equally for the role of victim and of executioner cannot permit the stabilisation of political relations, nor can it afford any element of predictability, since in either case terror would cease to be total. For this reason, the Leader's function is indispensable, since it

*... is only from the position in which the totalitarian movement, thanks to its unique organization, places the leader – only from his functional importance for the movement – that the leader principle develops its totalitarian character. (Arendt 1979: 365; see also Schmitt 1947: 435)[viii].*

Once the movement has seized power, the 'absolute primacy of the movement' over both state and nation is complemented by the unchallenged power of the Leader over the movement who, unlike the tyrant, discards 'all limited and local interests – economic, national, human, military – in favour of a purely fictitious reality in some indefinite distant future' (Arendt 1979: 412). To sustain both the dynamism and primacy of the movement, moreover, the Leader must ensure organisational 'fluidity', which is by definition antithetical to structure and stability (ibid.: 368).

All authoritarian regimes, whether or not they are dictatorships, necessarily imply hierarchy, stability, and some limitation of absolute power, since the principle of 'law as command' establishes relations of authority that in some form or other limit the actions of the government (ibid.: 405; see also Schmitt 1947: 437). Conversely, totalitarian regimes imply fluidity, absence of a clear chain of command, and a nihilistic principle of totalitarian 'lawfulness' that inhibits the stabilisation of any law, any institution, and any way of life. The totalitarian leader, moreover, is the only member of society who is not bound by his own decrees and edicts, or by legality of any kind. For this reason, Arendt argues that totalitarian societies can have no genuine state form, since the institution of the state is by definition a reified, legally bounded and finite entity. The state, moreover, serves to establish a distance between the ruling elite and the rest of the population. Totalitarianism collapses all distance, introducing a total identity between leader and masses that is actualised in its most concentrated form in the practice of organised acclamation.



March 1921 Lenin  
announced NEP

Given the ideological and organisational imperatives of the regime, 'those who aspire to total domination must liquidate all spontaneity, such as mere existence of individuality will always engender, and track it down in its most private forms,

regardless of how unpolitical and harmless these may seem' (Arendt 1979: 456). Conviction and even mere opinion are manifestations of the capacity for critical thought and spontaneous action. The greatest threat to totalitarian rule, and the main target of total terror, is human spontaneity or 'man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events' (ibid.: 455). Total obedience, then, springs not from a conventional authoritarian notion of obedience but derives from the totally isolated and lonely subject's 'sense of having a place in this world only from [one's] belonging to a movement' (ibid.: 324). 'Total loyalty' – the psychological basis for total domination – can only be expected from completely isolated human beings and is 'only possible when fidelity is emptied of all concrete content, from which changes of mind might naturally arise' (ibid.). In this regard Hitler certainly enjoyed a decided advantage over Stalin who inherited the Bolshevik party program, a far more 'troublesome burden than the 25 points of an amateur [Nazi] economist' (ibid.). In this sense, Arendt regards the New Economic Policy (NEP) initiated by Lenin as an 'obvious alternative[s] to Stalin's seizure of power and transformation of the one-party dictatorship into total domination' (Arendt 1967: xv-xvi, also vii, xi, xii, xiii, xv, xix, 390f). This has broader implications for Arendt's interpretation of Marxist doctrine itself, which even in its Leninist guise is acknowledged as an obstruction to Stalin's totalitarian ambitions. In this view,

*... the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist. (Arendt, 1979: 474)*

Arendt's description of the reactive totalitarian subject establishes a basis for her view that both Marxism and Social Darwinism had to be subjected to 'drastic oversimplification' (Stanley 1994: 23) before they could be exploited for totalitarian purposes. Only in totalitarian regimes does ideology effect a total rupture between reality and fiction by transforming reality through the actions of the subjects, who are the carriers of the 'idea' as well as the vehicle for its realisation.

Arendt's view that twentieth century totalitarian ideologies are irreducible to their nineteenth century antecedents also goes to the heart of the controversy about her novelty thesis – her view, that is, that mid-century totalitarian regimes

were both organisationally and ideologically unprecedented. This view is more aggressively contested in regard to the Stalinist regime. Andrew Arato is highly critical of Arendt's interpretation of Lenin's revolutionary one-party dictatorship, rejecting her view of it as authoritarian or 'pre-totalitarian'. While he agrees that there were options for non-totalitarian development at the point of Lenin's death, he argues that Lenin's political organisation had unmistakable totalitarian elements (Arato 2002: 474-9), a claim that Arendt does not dispute. Contrary to Arato's view, Arendt does not gloss over those tendencies and policy measures in Lenin's revolutionary dictatorship that presaged Stalin's 'Second Revolution' of 1929. Nonetheless, she views Lenin's NEP as a rational policy framework alternative to Stalin's revolution 'from above' (Arendt 1979: xxxii, 319). Arato contests this, arguing that the NEP was both a necessary *and* a temporary intervention. Still, what interests Arendt is that Lenin was willing at all to place practical considerations above ideological commitments, when these seemed justified by circumstances. Whatever the merit of Arendt's general analysis of Lenin's dictatorship, her central point is that Lenin was not averse to the utility of rational calculation within the broader context of Bolshevik ideology. Arato himself concedes that there 'were options for nontotalitarian developments at the moment of Lenin's death' (Arato, 2002: 476), and he adjudges Bukharin's strategy of an indefinite extension of the NEP as the basis of a real alternative to totalitarianism.

Conversely, Arendt's contention that Lenin favoured inner-party democracy, albeit restricted to the working class, is problematic to say the least, for it was Lenin, after all, who disbanded the elected constituent assembly and combated pluralistic tendencies within the party.

### *Statesmanship*

Nevertheless, Arato strains the spirit of Arendt's analysis to match his reservations. Arendt, we are told, assures 'us that the relevant actions were those of the great practical statesman (that is, a "Great Dictator"?) and not the Marxist ideologue' (Arato 2002: 475). What Arendt actually argues is that 'in these purely practical political matters Lenin followed his great instincts for statesmanship rather than his Marxist convictions' (Arendt 1979: 319). Arendt does not equate statesmanship with dictatorship but points to Lenin's undeniable leadership skills, nonetheless conceding that these were constantly being challenged by his dogmatic Marxist convictions. Arendt variously overstates and oversimplifies the

content of Lenin's political decisions, but she hardly endorses either Lenin's dictatorship or his dictatorial tendencies, nor is she mistaken in her view that Lenin made important concessions to practical politics. These concessions may be of questionable historical significance, but then Arendt's objective is to identify the totalitarian elements of the Leninist dictatorship; she was not engaged in writing a history of the revolution.

Arendt distinguishes between the Bolshevik movement, which in her view had definite totalitarian characteristics, and Lenin's revolutionary dictatorship, which did not constitute 'full totalitarian rule' in her sense (ibid.: 318). The distinction might seem trite taken out of context, but then it is Arato who concedes that Arendt 'is surprisingly aware of the variety of autocratic forms of rule' (Arato 2002: 473), and approvingly cites her postulation of 'a post-totalitarian dictatorship in the Soviet Union' (ibid.: 474) following Stalin's death in 1953. Arato is willing to accept Arendt's notion of 'detotalitarianisation' but unwilling to countenance the possibility of a Leninist pre-totalitarian dictatorship. His reasoning is that

*... the 'conspiratorial party within the party' to which Arendt ascribes the victory of Stalin, was in fact the party that Lenin invented and institutionalised after 1917 as the all-powerful agent of dictatorship. (ibid.: 477)*

Yet surely Arato cannot be suggesting that the Soviet Communist Party of 1917, 1924, 1929 and 1938 were one and the same institution? Of course it was always 'the all-powerful agent of dictatorship', but of what kind of dictatorship? If Stalin simply inherited a ready-made totalitarian regime, what then possessed him to purge and exterminate practically the entire Bolshevik elite?**[ix]** Moreover, it is entirely wrong to suggest that Arendt apparently thought there were 'totalitarian elements in Marx, but not Lenin' (ibid.: 499n). Arendt certainly identified totalitarian 'elements' in Marx's thinking, and Lenin was nothing if not Marxist, a fact accepted as axiomatic by Arendt. What she challenges is the assumption of a direct line of affinity between Lenin's revolutionary thought and Stalin's perversion of even his own ideas:

*The fact that the most perfect education in Marxism and Leninism was no guide whatsoever for political behaviour – that, on the contrary, one could follow the party line only if one repeated each morning what Stalin had announced the night before – naturally resulted in the same state of mind, the same concentrated*

*obedience, undivided by any attempt to understand what one was doing, that Himmler's ingenious watchword for his SS-men expressed: 'My honour is my loyalty'. (Arendt 1979: 324)*

In short, Arendt stresses Stalin's instrumentalist totalitarian logic that had as little to do with Marxism as Hitler's *Volksgemeinschaft* had to do with brotherly love.

Allusions to Social Darwinism as a precursor of Nazism can be quite as misleading as portraying Stalin as an authentic Marxist-Leninist, although in one important sense – man as the accidental product of natural development – Darwinism prefigures the Nazi penchant for irresistible natural laws. Darwin's evolutionary theory, however, is in principle a theory of chaos, of chance. It describes a natural process characterised by an overwhelming tendency to fail; a becoming that is as much a product of that failure as it is of opportunity. One could liken the totalitarian ideologies themselves to the chance 'successes' of nature, emerging from a melange of genetic variants to become fully formed entities dominating the intellectual landscape of history, as have many species dominated their natural environments. Opportunity, genetic predisposition, circumstance; together these produce a chance crystallisation of a new political reality that however forever holds within itself the potential of decline and catastrophe. The allusion to the catastrophic events of nature that brought about the extinction of the dinosaurs, throwing open the field of opportunity for other species to develop, is analogous of the historical catastrophe preceding the totalitarian movements. Indeed, it would not be stretching the bounds of credulity to portray the First World War as the historical equivalent of an asteroid striking earth, signalling the extinction of nineteenth century Europe and casting a pall over the familiar social and intellectual currents of European culture. Out of this disaster certain ideologies rose to prominence, but not without the catalyst of human agency. Human agency is thus also central to the historical process, and the Bolshevik Revolution is only the most notable and apparent instance of such agency in the twentieth century. The Darwinist metaphor might therefore elucidate Arendt's interpretation of the constellation of ideologies vying for dominance during the late nineteenth century in historical circumstances that were as yet unfavourable to a final outcome. Bolshevism was already a fully formed contender prior to the First World War, whereas the elements of National Socialist ideology were condensed in the aftermath of Europe's orgy of violence.



Arendt does not indulge in speculation about whether or not the Bolshevik revolution was foredoomed, given the impact of war, the violence of the revolution, and the brutal civil war that followed. But she does argue that the revolution could have taken a different course (see e.g. *ibid.*: 319). Similarly, whilst acknowledging the odds against a successful republican experiment in Weimar Germany, Arendt argues that National Socialism need not have triumphed in 1933. Nonetheless, once these movements had emerged victorious, the ground for autonomous human agency was eliminated by 'stabilising' men 'in order to prevent any unforeseen, free, or spontaneous acts that might hinder freely racing terror' (Arendt 1954a: 342). Law, understood as positive laws stabilising and delimiting a public-political realm of spontaneous human action governed by predictable moral, ethical, and legal standards, was now viewed as an obstacle to totalitarian 'lawfulness'. The 'law of movement itself, Nature or History, singles out the foes of mankind and no free action of mere men is permitted to interfere with it. Guilt and innocence become meaningless categories; "guilty" is he who stands in the path of terror' (*ibid.*). Indeed, there have been no instances of the enduring free action of men in the modern era outside of a public political realm governed by positive laws and guaranteed by the institutions of a sovereign territorial state. With all its impersonal power structures, the state was a final hurdle to be overcome en route to totalitarian rule.

### *Civil society*

I have already drawn the reader's attention to Arendt's analysis of the novel strategy of the inter-war totalitarian movements, which by posing an extra-constitutional and extra-legal challenge to sovereign state authority prised open the most vulnerable aspect of the bourgeoisie's formidable armour. The perceptiveness of Arendt's analysis of the inter-war period is nothing short of prescient, once she turns this insight into an explanation of the vulnerability, in turn, of post-totalitarian dictatorships to a resurgent 'civil society'. Although Arendt never uses the latter term, she clearly perceives the vulnerability of the post-Stalin dictatorships to the inverse strategy of undermining dictatorial authority by way of the popular reassertion of autonomous civic action, which constitutes the discursive basis of a reconstituted public realm. Whereas once the totalitarian movements had undermined the state by mobilising and organising mass social movements, the reified remnants of once dynamic totalitarian regimes are vulnerable to eruptions of spontaneous political action. Arendt, to be sure,

regarded such political action as virtually impossible in full-blown totalitarian dictatorships. However, once a totalitarian regime undergoes a process of 'stabilisation', such as occurred in the post-Stalin era, the ground or 'space' for a reconstituted public realm re-emerges. All true totalitarian dictators guard against this development. Conversely, authoritarian dictators preside over institutionalised regimes of hierarchical power structures, which are by their very nature vulnerable to 'extra-authoritarian', popular interventions such as we witnessed in Poland in the early 1980s and throughout Eastern Europe in 1989. Post-totalitarian dictatorships, deprived of their former dynamism, can only react to concerted political challenges.

There was nonetheless an important difference between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union that should be noted here. For whereas the pre-Nazi bourgeois nation-state was re-established in the wake of Hitler's defeat, pre-Soviet Russia had never made the transition to bourgeois rule; that is, 'the Russian despotism never developed into a rational state in the Western sense but remained fluid, anarchic, and unorganized' (Arendt 1979: 247). Hence, the longevity of post-totalitarian (i.e. post-Stalin) Soviet rule owed as much to the absence of any alternative tradition of state power as it did to the hegemony of the Communist Party. Germany reverted to its pre-Nazi statism with relative ease whereas

*... in Russia the change was not back to anything we would call normal but a return to despotism; and here we should not forget that a change from total domination with its millions of entirely innocent victims to a tyrannical regime which persecutes only its opposition can perhaps best be understood as something which is normal in the framework of Russian history. (Arendt 1975: 265-6)*

The revolutionary upheavals of inter-war Europe were characterised by a wholly new brand of voluntarism and leadership that culminated in the formation of a range of autocratic and dictatorial regimes identified with the person of the dictator. In Hitler's case, as Joachim Fest observed in 1973, what happened is 'inconceivable without him, in every respect and in every detail. Any definition of National Socialism (or the system of government based upon it) that omits the name of Hitler misses the heart of the matter' (Fest 1973: 19). This view is echoed by Raymond Aron, who argues that what happened in Germany is incomprehensible if we 'omit the personal equation of the *Führer* and his combination of genius and paranoia' (Aron 1980: 39). No doubt the same is true

of Stalin, although as we shall see, historians are profoundly divided on this question. Whether we focus on the 1930s, Hitler's glory years and Stalin's nightmare of terror, or the war years during which Hitler's mania of destruction was halted by wave upon wave of Soviet cannon fodder, the personal imprint of the two dictators is unmistakable. But to say so merely elucidates a single dimension of a more complex reality. For equally important is the organisational dimension of the totalitarian system of rule that embraces a community of men who have become 'equally superfluous' (Arendt 1979: 457) and an ideological regime of terror that aims totally to eliminate the web of human relations.

The same case can be made for Stalin and in a somewhat qualified sense also for Mussolini. And indeed the case needs to be made. For to receive these historical figures as somehow preordained and hence irresistible entails surrendering to their logic, a fatalistic mind-set quite prevalent amongst exiled intellectuals of the inter-war years. Bertolt Brecht, for example, bitterly scorned Hitler's barbaric regime, yet went to extraordinary lengths to justify in his own mind what was happening in Stalin's utopia. Martin Esslin notes that in a man of Brecht's high intelligence, this exercise in rationalisation amounted to 'a kind of mental suicide, a *sacrificium intellectus*; and his letters show that he was only too well aware of it' (Esslin 1982: 13). Conversely, the personality type of Hitler 'teaches us something which, until his appearance, was unknown to history on this level: that utter individual nullity or mediocrity may be combined in one man with exceptional political virtuosity' (Fest 1973: 20). Hitler played the political field with unparalleled skill, alone deciding on the nature and duration of tactical alliances, his thought and actions in this regard relatively free of preconceptions, at least during the pre-war period. In short, 'he was no-one's tool'. Still, Fest's view that Hitler 'coolly subordinated everything - people, ideas, forces, opponents, principles - to the goal that was the obsession of his life: the primitive accumulation of personal power' (ibid.), seriously underplays the role of ideology in Hitler's political universe. Hitler undoubtedly relished power, and certainly had no use for the trappings and amusements that preoccupied many of his satraps. Stalin, by contrast, could count on and exploit an existing system of power accumulation whilst contending with far greater forces of resistance, and far more difficult and unstable circumstances. 'Class-thinking' was nonetheless an altogether more respectable preoccupation of both the European masses and the intelligentsia than 'race-thinking' ever was. Hence, what Stalin lacked in the way of a socially cohesive and highly organised system of consensual complicity, he

was able to make up for by ideological fiat and unfettered domestic terror. Yet Stalin, too, had to make a transition, transforming Marxist-Leninist doctrine into a deductive principle of action underpinning his totalitarian system of government.

The complex interplay of personal qualities and historical circumstances that determined the outcome of the revolutions-from-above carried out by Hitler and Stalin will be examined in greater detail in chapter five. In this section I have stressed the impact of World War One and revolution, which generated what Zeev Sternhell describes as a 'break-away'; cataclysmic events 'so disruptive as to take on the dimensions of a crisis in civilization itself' (Sternhell 1979: 333). Pre-war 'mob' elements or militant residues of decaying classes - 'the refuse of all classes' (Arendt 1979: 155) - deprived of political representation and scornful of a society from which they were excluded, already dominated the political landscape of many European societies prior to the Great War (ibid.: 107, 108). More controversially, Arendt distinguishes between these mob elements, borne of nineteenth century street politics and the social dislocations produced by industrialisation, and twentieth century 'masses' springing from a disintegrating class society (ibid.: 326). With both common interest and 'specific class articulateness' (ibid.: 311) rendered ineffective as a basis for party or class political action, Continental Europe's pre-war bourgeois hegemony, and its mood of generalised complacency, gave way to 'anarchic despair' (ibid.: 327), propelling rootless and 'isolated' masses into the organisational structures of totalitarian movements.

### *Isolation*



### *Volksgemeinschaft*

Arendt defines 'isolation' in this sense as a pre-totalitarian condition, in which the human capacities for action and power are frustrated by the destruction of political life characteristic of tyrannies (ibid.: 474). 'Loneliness', on the other

hand, is a consequence of totalitarian rule, which destroys the individual's capacities for thought and experience (ibid.: 475). A state of loneliness coupled to a growing individual sense of 'uprootedness' and 'superfluousness' liberated these masses from their social attachments and class identities (ibid.: 311). In the case of Germany, Hitler was able to exploit a peculiar mix of pathos and hope engendered by the devastation of the Great War. Germany's defeat was a defeat for continuity, and Hitler spoke to a hope for a new beginning that a disastrous series of inter-war setbacks had frustrated but not quashed; a new beginning, moreover, that also entailed a yearning for the restoration of certain 'traditional' values. Hitler's genius, if that is what it was, lay in his ability to speak to this paradoxical public mood, at once promising a future devoid of class and party political divisions and their replacement by an ideal *Volksgemeinschaft* which, however, entailed the no less divisive ideal of racial purity. If the commitment to a classless and party-less society was to prove little more than a 'theatrical concession to the desires of violently discontented masses' (ibid.: 263), given the already disastrous state of parliamentary politics and the social devastation wrought by mass unemployment, the commitment to the idea of race was to prove anything but flighty.

As I have argued in this essay, Arendt's concept of totalitarian ideology as an instrument of terror rather than of persuasion gains fuller expression in conjunction with her discussion of the role of propaganda in constructing totalitarian rule. For Arendt the distinction between totalitarian ideology *qua* prosaic amalgam of borrowed elements, and totalitarian propaganda, the bearer of its fictional narrative, is primarily functional. The utility and intensity of propaganda is largely dictated by the nature of the threat posed by the non-totalitarian world to totalitarian regimes, and therefore serves the totalitarian dictator in his dealings with the outside world, although it plays an important role in overcoming such obstacles as freedom of speech and of association under conditions of constitutional government (ibid.: 341-4). Alternately, ideological indoctrination, invariably combined with terror, is directed inwardly at the initiated and '*increases* with the strength of the movements or totalitarian governments' isolation and security from outside interference' (ibid.: 344; emphasis added; see Arendt 1953a: 297-99). For Arendt, the real horror of the totalitarian application of terror, and by implication of totalitarian ideology, is that it not only continues to reign over populations whose subjugation has become absolute, but in fact intensifies over time. Whereas Miliband has argued that

Stalinist terror operated in anticipation of opposition, constantly striking 'at people who were perfectly willing to conform, on the suspicion that they might eventually cease to be willing' (Miliband 1988: 145), for Arendt totalitarian terror was the *function* of the 'idea', its rationale.

Propaganda disappears entirely whenever the rule of terror has eliminated a sense for reality and factuality, and the 'utilitarian expectations of common sense' (Arendt 1979: 457). Together, ideology and propaganda, terror and fiction, weave elements of reality, of 'verifiable experiences', into generalised suprasensible worlds 'fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical, consistent, and organized' (ibid.: 362). In practice, this entails transforming movements into embodiments of ideology, 'charged with the idea', whether of race or of class. In other words, ideology is applied as an organisational principle to produce what Hitler aptly describes as a 'living organization' (Hitler in ibid.). The counterpart of the living organisation is the 'special laboratory' (ibid.: 392, 437, 458), the arena for the totalitarian experiment in total domination. Understood in these terms, the concentration camp is the 'true central institution of totalitarian organizational power' (ibid.: 438, also 456) in which propaganda has become as superfluous as humanity itself, and the extermination camp the monument to the totalitarian regime's ideological consistency.

Towards the close of the war, mounting evidence of the existence and practices of the dedicated German extermination centres became a central preoccupation of Arendt's writing. In 1945, she noted that 'neither in ancient nor medieval nor modern history, did destruction become a well-formulated programme or its execution a highly organized, bureaucratized, and systematized process' (Arendt 1945a: 109). Intimations of Arendt's novelty thesis are already quite apparent, as is her view that the destructiveness of the Nazi regime cannot be comprehended merely as a continuation or direct consequence of the nihilism undoubtedly unleashed by the First World War. If the extraordinary and senseless destructiveness of the First World War provided the breeding ground for totalitarian movements, their ideologies manifested themselves as an 'intoxication of destruction as an actual experience, dreaming the stupid dream of producing the void' (ibid.: 110). The regulated death rate of the extermination camps was complemented by the organised torture of the concentration camps, whose purpose was 'not so much to inflict death as to put the victim in a permanent

status of dying' (Arendt 1950a: 238). The interweaving of the human experience of death and a death-like existence in the extermination and concentration camps respectively were to Arendt's mind a corollary of the totalitarian organisation of society.

Arendt's sense of the 'continuity' of experience between life in totalitarian societies and death – or a death-like existence – in the camps, has been little discussed in the relevant literature. Commentators instead generally focus on the distinct dynamics of terror in German and Soviet society, pointing to the absence of dedicated extermination facilities in the Soviet Union and to a more pervasive regime of terror during the Stalin years. Michael Halberstam, for example, takes Arendt to task for seemingly disregarding the fact that ethnic Germans were not subjected to the level of terror that the constant threat of deportation visited upon even high party officials in the Soviet Union during the 1930s (Halberstam 2001: 106). Arendt was aware of this[x], explicitly arguing that the pre-war Nazi regime was not properly totalitarian and that it was only with *Kristallnacht* in 1938 and the outbreak of war that Hitler's terror machine came into its own. Whereas terror reached its height in Germany with the long series of post-1941 military defeats, terror in the Soviet Union abated with the onset of war, only to resume with military victory, followed by the mass deportation of returning Soviet POWs (see e.g. Arendt 1979: xxv). It is the nature of total terror that concerns Arendt, a distinctive logic of total domination that aims to transform all of society, and

*... to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual ... The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species... Totalitarian domination attempts to achieve this goal both through ideological indoctrination of the elite formations and through absolute terror in the camps. (ibid.: 438)*

Ideological indoctrination pervades all of society in an attempt to lay hold of the general population, but the experiment in indoctrination is complemented by the concentration camp regime, the existence of which is public knowledge. It is this knowledge that makes terror a palpable daily reality of the general populace.

### *Total domination*

Despite their 'cynically admitted anti-utility', the camps are the key to sustaining totalitarian rule, for the camp system infuses society with an 'undefined fear' that

is essential both to maintaining the totalitarian movement's hold over the populace and to inspiring 'its nuclear troops with fanaticism'. The camps also perform the important function of initiating the regime's elite cadres into the techniques of 'total domination', which would not be possible outside of this context, at least and until total domination had been established over all members of society. Without the camps, 'the dominating and the dominated would only too quickly sink back into the "old bourgeois routine"' (ibid.: 456). The camp phenomenon is thus central to Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism, for the camp system constitutes the arena in which the innate logic of totalitarian rule reveals itself and in which the experiment in denaturing human beings is conducted. The 'society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely'. It would be a considerable understatement to describe as controversial Arendt's rejection of the notion that 'there was such a thing as one human nature established for all time' as a 'tragic fallacy' (ibid.: 456). A clue to this statement, as indeed to the integral relation between Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and her post-*Origins* theory of politics, is contained in a 1953 essay in which Arendt argues that 'the success of totalitarianism is identical with a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before' (Arendt 1953c: 408). In the following section I would like to trace the contours of this 'liquidation of freedom' as it unfolds in Arendt's account of the threefold stages of the totalitarian assault on human individuality.

*'To dream the stupid dream of producing the void': Denaturing the human individual*



Stalin Gulag  
Memorial

*Man, this flexible being, who submits himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of his fellow-men, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when*



*it is shown to him and of losing it to the point where he has no realisation that he is robbed of it. (Montesquieu)*

'Terror' is not a generic term of reference in Arendt's political thought. In a 1953 address published as

### *Mankind and Terror*

, Arendt distinguishes between the principal forms of terror in Western political history. She argues that all forms of pre-totalitarian terror associated with tyranny, despotism, dictatorship, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements, plebiscitary democracy and modern one-party states, have a clearly circumscribed goal, target genuine opponents and generally cease once the regime's objectives have been attained. Thus, for example, tyrannical forms of terror eliminate opposition as well as destroying the public realm of politics whereas the chief goal of revolutionary terror is to establish a new 'code of laws' (Arendt 1953a: 298). Totalitarian terror, on the other hand, commences once the regime has eliminated all its real enemies and is therefore apparently 'counter to the perpetrator's real [utilitarian] interests' (ibid.: 302-03)[xi].

Thus the proposition that Stalin's terror regime was a manifestation of revolutionary violence belies the fact that by the late 1920s all active resistance to the new Soviet regime had been eliminated. Henceforth, terror no longer served 'the utilitarian motives and self-interest of the rulers' (Arendt 1979: 440). Nor does the relative scale of terror necessarily reveal its nature and purpose. Moreover, distinctions such as that between Stalin's 'labour camps' and Hitler's concentration camps tend to be misleading insofar as the language of terror - its formal designations - typically conceals more than it reveals of the functioning of the terror apparatus. In this regard Arendt cautions against liberal rationalisations about 'fear' and 'submission' (Arendt 1953a: 300)[xii], for total terror targets 'objective' categories of victim without reference to the individuation presupposed by the logic of crime and punishment. The most important characteristic of totalitarian terror, however, is that it functions independently from such positive laws as may exist, and is unleashed only once all active and genuine opponents have been eliminated.

Moreover, the totalitarian regime of ideology and terror does not presuppose a state of total compliance for the simple reason that compliance presupposes

norms whereas 'totalitarian regimes establish a functioning world of no-sense' emptied of '[c]ommon sense trained in utilitarian thinking' (Arendt 1979: 458). But this can hardly be a description of the broader society in either Nazi Germany or Stalin's Russia. Arendt argues that these societies only very imperfectly resemble their most characteristic institutions, the concentration camps, whose experiment in total domination generates an 'enforced oblivion' of the social subject, a strategy that 'is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses' (ibid.: 447). The various stages in the destruction of the individuality of the totalitarian subject begin in society and are completed in the artificial environment of the camp system, which reduces the inmates to 'bundles of reactions' (ibid.: 441). Although the broader society in totalitarian regimes is infused with a distinctive totalitarian logic, there are limits to the application of totalitarianism's ideological 'supersense', for as long as society has not been totally subjected to 'global control' (ibid.: 459).

What is true of the general populace of totalitarian societies thus scarcely hints at the wholly fabricated environment of the camps, the locus of the experiment in total domination. Arendt identifies three stages marking the journey into hell of the victims of total terror. The first stage entails the organised destruction of the 'juridical person in man' by removing objective categories of people from the purview of the law and establishing the concentration camp system as an extra-judicial penal system. The objective innocence of the latter's inmates, and the extra-legal status of its institutional existence, place the concentration camp system as a whole outside the realm of rational juridical calculation, and in a universe wholly different from a rights-based utilitarian regime (ibid.: 447-51). The death of the juridical person, 'of the person *qua* subject of rights' (Benhabib 1996: 65), is pre-figured by the nineteenth century experience of imperialism which, as we have seen, pitted the institutions of the imperialist nation-state against the fragile belief, on the part of the imperialist nations, in the universal rights of man. Arendt argues that the Rights of Man were never 'philosophically established' or 'politically secured' and hence were inherently vulnerable to historical developments (Arendt 1979: 447). The decline of the nation-state and the corruption of the supposedly inalienable Rights of Man, concomitant with nation-state imperialism, were amplified by the experience of the First World War, which exposed the fatal nexus between Europe's high revolutionary ideals and her naked political ambitions. Total war had generated refugees on an unprecedented scale and the post-war Minority Treaties merely formalised the

‘denationalisation’ of millions of displaced persons, effectively placing them outside of Europe’s supposedly rights-based legal and political order (ibid.). The totalitarian experiment in the disenfranchisement and destruction of the juridical person marked the passage from the corruption of the Rights of Man to the systematic elimination of the juridical subject in man. This occurs when even a ‘voluntarily co-ordinated’ population – a population that cedes its political rights under extremes of terror – is deprived of its civil rights, becoming ‘just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and homeless’ (ibid.: 451).

Totalitarian rule thus targets both ‘free opposition’ and ‘free consent’, since individual autonomy of any sort undermines the principle of total terror that arbitrarily selects objective categories of victim, destroying the stability and predictability that is incompatible with a system of rule predicated on perpetual motion. The device of ‘arbitrary arrest’ eliminates the capacity for free consent, ‘just as torture ... destroys the possibility of opposition’ (ibid.). In this context Arendt makes a threefold distinction between the initial phase of totalitarian terror, the subsequent targeting of ‘objective categories’ of victims, and, finally, the more generalised state of terror that takes hold of all of society at the height of totalitarian rule. Whereas totalitarian rulers initially target opponents and those construed as asocial elements – the ‘amalgam of political and criminals’ (ibid.: 449) – this is followed by categories of enemy, such as homosexuals, Jews, and class enemies, whose most outstanding trait is complete innocence. Thus ‘deprived of the protective distinction that comes of their having done something wrong, they are utterly exposed to the arbitrary’ (ibid.)**[xiii]**. On the other hand, the general populace is often indifferent to the fate of the victims, since the former are usually still beholden to the utilitarian notion (or alibi) that in order to be ‘punished’, one must necessarily have ‘done something’.

Therefore, ethnic Aryans could still take some comfort from the fact that they were *Judenrein*, heterosexuals that they were not ‘perverted’, the proletariat that they were not ‘counter-revolutionaries’ – rationalisations that become quite impossible once total terror lays hold of the broader society. Arendt stresses that in the case of Germany, total terror became anything like a generalised condition only at the height of the war and Nazism’s most terroristic phase, from 1942 to 1944**[xiv]**.

*... [a]ny, even the most tyrannical, restriction of this arbitrary persecution to certain opinions of a religious or political nature, to certain modes of intellectual*

*or erotic social behaviour, to certain freshly invented 'crimes', would render the camps superfluous, because in the long run no attitude and no opinion can withstand the threat of so much horror; and above all it would make for a new system of justice, which, given any stability at all, could not fail to produce a new juridical person in man, that would elude the totalitarian domination. (Arendt 1979: 451)*

Thus '[w]hile the classification of inmates by categories is only a tactical, organizational measure, the arbitrary selection of victims indicates the essential principle of the institution' (ibid.: 450). 'Arbitrary' in this context, it is again stressed, does not mean that the Nazis did not target determinate or general categories of victim, but instead that these categories were constantly expanded in ways that eliminated rational calculation as the basis for the actions of the populace. Even anti-Jewish measures were initially restricted to certain categories of Jew. At the height of total terror, moreover, the regime begins to apply the organisational principles of the camp system to society as a whole, when even those people indispensable to the functioning of the regime are consumed by the terror.

### *Living corpses*

A second phase in the preparation of 'living corpses' targets the moral person in man. This entails the 'creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible', since 'organised complicity' is constantly extended to include the broader society and the victims themselves (ibid.: 452). In its most extreme form, total terror coerces the participation of the concentration and death camp inmates in the extermination process itself. This is intended to destroy the capacity of the victims to form moral judgements. Thus, for example, a mother confronted by the 'choice' of which child immediately to send to the gas chamber is condemned not only to select death for the one, but also to internalise the principle of terror that always already dictates the ultimate death of the other. Her powerlessness to influence the ultimate outcome for either of her offspring means that the temporary reprieve for the surviving child is the source of an infinite torment that ceases only with the completion of the family murder. Under circumstances in which the distinction between persecutor and persecuted, killer and victim, is systematically undermined, the process of killing itself assumes the mantle of unreality corresponding to the existence of 'living corpses' [xv].

However, the organised complicity of society in the crimes of the totalitarian regime begins with the political decision to proceed with exterminations. The decision, communicated to the bureaucracy of murder and presaged by public statements of intent, implicates the general population merely by dint of the fact that opposition to the policy would itself be a grave crime. To do good is to disobey the law, but to obey the law is to be complicit in the crime. Conversely, preparations for the mass crimes prey on civilian institutions, such as the Jewish Councils of Europe, which facilitated the identification and location of the victims, often knowing their intended fate. The process of dehumanisation of the victims thus encompasses the whole of their life experience and identity whilst embracing the entirety of the living world of the societies in which this process unfolds. Within the camps, a regime of *Kapos* institutionalises the dehumanisation of the victims, and participation by camp authorities in daily atrocities is deliberately limited to functions of oversight. With the mechanisation of the killing process in the Nazi death camps – that is ‘once the machine had replaced the man’ – ‘the executioner could avoid all contact with the victim’ (Todorov 2000: 162)[xvi].

Tzvetan Todorov argues that there is ample proof of the survival of the moral person even under the most extreme circumstances in the camps (ibid.). This fact is raised as an objection to Arendt’s argument that the camps to a significant extent accomplished a denaturing of man. But whereas Todorov is right that the camps were not devoid of virtuous acts, Arendt’s central argument is of a different order. She does not suggest, as Todorov seems to think, that the moral person in man is superficial, but rather that there are certain limits beyond which humanity cannot endure. The experiment in total terror probes these limits, and by relentlessly undermining the integrity of ethically grounded human relations, and notably the individual human capacity for spontaneously giving friendship, seeks to transform them, revealing to the world that indeed ‘everything is possible’, including the destruction of the most fundamental human bonds evinced in expressions of care, concern, support and friendship.

Nevertheless, the murder of the moral person and the annihilation of the juridical person are insufficient conditions of a thoroughgoing dehumanisation of the victims, for the production of ‘living corpses’ presupposes not only persons stripped of rights and of conscience, but also the suppression of an innately human individuality – of ‘the uniqueness shaped in equal parts by nature, will, and destiny’ (Arendt 1979: 454). This third and decisive step in the preparation of

living corpses cannot be effected by torture conventionally understood, since the latter is aimed at individuals and entails a rational means-ends calculation (ibid.: 453). The camp regime, on the other hand, prepares otherwise 'normal' members of the SS to become elite cadres and bearers of Nazism's principal mission. Conversely, the techniques employed to induce both perpetrators and victims to participate dispassionately in the systematic extermination of innocent people demonstrates the possibility of transforming men and women into 'specimens of the human animal' (ibid.: 454, 455). The experience of the homeland transit camps, and especially the brutality of the 'transports', delivered to the camps a mass of degraded and filthy humanity bordering on the 'inhuman'. Exposed to such conditions - and this was by no means exclusively the experience of Jews but also, for example, of three million Soviet POWs - social conditioning was subverted and to some extent reversed, exposing brutalised populations to their own uninhibited and desperate acts[xvii].

To some extent, the breakdown of social values occurs wherever brutality and unpredictability characterise the individual's common experience of daily life. In conditions of systematic and bestial cruelty, mere survival displaces all other considerations as a principle of action. From the point of view of the perpetrators - the Aryan and East European camp guards and administrators -, the condition of the victims resonates with their propaganda image, reinforcing psychological rationalisations and prejudice. In short, the camps create the conditions in which it is possible, even for the less ideologically driven and more psychologically functional perpetrator, to believe the lie - or rather the universal human truth - that unfolds before his or her very eyes: 'lying was not enough. In order to be believed, the Nazis had to fabricate reality itself and make the Jews *look* subhuman' (Arendt 1946a: 199; see Todorov 2000: 158-65).



If This is a Man -  
Primo Levi

It is an incontestable and remarkable fact, as Todorov and Primo Levi have argued, that moral life was never utterly extinguished in the concentration camps and Gulag. Levi has produced perhaps the classic account of an unrelenting horror that at times could be punctuated by gestures of humanity quite as unimaginable to us as the circumstances these small acts fleetingly transcended. Yet Levi himself stresses that only the most fortunate, skilled, strong, astute, or ruthless managed to survive the camp regime. There is a tortured awareness, a horrible 'presence' lurking in these remarkable accounts of camp life by no less remarkable individuals, such as Levi, who speaks of the 'particularly pitiless, vigorous and inhuman individuals, installed (following an investiture by the SS command, which showed itself in such choices to possess satanic knowledge of human beings) in the posts of *Kapos*, *Blockältester*, etc.' (Levi 2000a: 105). A camp regime in which select victims were goaded into perpetrating sadistic acts on fellow prisoners was calculated to brutalise the moral instincts of even the strongest inmates, and produce the bestial mass portrayed in the regime's propaganda.

Once human beings have been stripped of their individuality, of their capacity for spontaneously 'beginning something new', which capacity cannot be explained as mere reactions to environment and events, their extermination need no longer entail concessions to the humanity of the executioners, whose triumph consists in the tortured victim's renouncing and abandoning himself 'to the point of ceasing to affirm his identity' (Rousset in Arendt 1979: 455). Once murder is released from all sense of a shared humanity, the way is thrown open to the creation of the most perfect totalitarian society inhabited by the 'model "citizen"'. The death camps, whose size and manpower stood in an inverse relation to the number of their victims, had the limited function of processing superfluous human matter. Exposure of the SS to the more gruesome aspects of the very processes they commanded was relatively limited. It was the victims themselves who harvested the by-products of human matter, washing and packing hair, extracting teeth from the corpses, and so on (Müller 1999: 65-8). By contrast the concentration camp was the most nearly perfect realisation of a totalitarian society composed of the 'human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions' (Arendt 1979: 456). This, to be sure, was a reality that could only very imperfectly be reproduced outside of the camp system as a whole. It is for this reason that Arendt views the concentration camp system as essential to totalitarian rule, and as revealing its true nature[xviii] .

The death camps may have been historically unique, both in terms of their mechanised routines and their concentrated destructiveness. Nonetheless, the concentration camps were the heart of a system of rule, not only inspiring an undefined fear in society but actualising the logic of total domination in concrete organisational form.

### *Camp system*

In other words, the phenomenon of the camp system is an integral facet and logical adjunct to the totalitarian system of government, rather than an 'excess' of this or that government or party agency. The concentration camps, rather than the camps dedicated to industrial genocide, were a palpable daily reality to ordinary citizens. These were not institutions situated in forests and backward provinces, but were often enough constructed within sight of or situated directly in German towns and cities. This was true, for example, of Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, Landsberg and hundreds of secondary and satellite camps. Each main camp presided over many sub-camps; in the Berlin area alone, there were 1 100 satellite camps of the main camp, Sachsenhausen. As Overy notes, '[n]o one in Germany could ever pretend that the camps were hidden from view' (Overy 2004: 606)[xix]. The 'uselessness' or 'anti-utility' of the camps is thus in a certain sense only apparent (Arendt 1979: 456). Knowledge of the extreme is indispensable to a regime premised on an internalisation of terror and domination. For this reason, the existence of the concentration camps was never concealed from the civilian population, as the popular journalism and literature of the day amply attests[xx].

Reconciling the history and daily reality of these societies with what happened in the camps is therefore an impossible task if we proceed from the assumption that no government or political leadership could possibly have conceived the extremes of the camp regime. The historians whose functionalist interpretation of the 'Final Solution' caused such a ruckus in the 1980s seem not to have the same reservations about the intentions of the Euthanasia programme. The latter not only targeted ethnic Aryans for extermination in clinics on German soil[xxi], but also indisputably did so on the explicit instructions of *Reichskanzlei* officials, acting on Hitler's direct orders[xxii]. This is not to suggest that incremental radicalisation of policy was not a key device of Nazi rule, since initial measures and categories of victims were expanded beyond the scope of early policy guidelines. But if the ambitions of the regime grew over time, Hitler's



pathological hatred of his racial and ideological victims preceded Nazi rule and was a constant feature of his speeches and writings at least as far back as 1918.

What the functionalists describe, in part, as 'excesses' and the evidence they adduce for their thesis stems in large part, and somewhat paradoxically, from Hitler's order to suspend the Euthanasia programme. Hitler's direct hand in this programme is well documented – his signed order of September 1, 1939 extant – and he utilised the power 'radiating from the Chancellery of the Führer', via the offices of Philipp Bouhler and Viktor Brack, to induct an 'odd assortment of highly educated, and morally vacant humanity' into the programme (Burleigh 1996c: 106). The programme was indeed 'suspended' in its existing form by Hitler due to adverse public reaction once news of the murder in German and Austrian clinics became common knowledge. But it is equally true that the programme merely changed tactics, engaging a far greater number of clinics in a campaign of starvation and lethal injections that lasted until the close of the war. Moreover it is true, as the functionalists argue, that the members of the *Aktion T4* [xxiii] staff gravitated from its activity of murdering the mentally and physically unsound to genocide in the extermination camps in Poland. This, in their view, suggests a progressive and somewhat uncontrolled, even 'chaotic' extension of the euthanasia logic rather than a logical exploitation of a ready-made and acclimatised genocidal elite.

Certainly the euthanasia programme did more than implicate Germany's medical, academic and legal professions. It pioneered discoveries, notably that patients could be co-opted into killing fellow inmates, an innovation that was put to effective use in the death camps. Skills honed in the euthanasia programme were perfected in the extermination camps. But the latter belonged to a discrete programme infinitely more complex, expansive and inclusive than the clinical murder, *inter alia*, of ill and disabled children. T4 functioned within society and indeed enjoyed support, especially from those elders eager to be rid of their burdensome charges. Morally, there was no difference between murdering Jews and murdering disabled Aryan children [xxiv]. Nonetheless, the 'Final Solution' had an altogether more ambitious political and ideological dimension. Geographically, it encompassed all of occupied Europe and engaged all the resources of the societies in which it operated, most especially in Greater Germany itself. Moreover, beyond mere tactical manoeuvrings, Hitler would never have curtailed the programme in response to public opinion, nor would he

permit his ministers or the military to interfere in its execution.

The camps were thus both a measure of the regime's fanaticism and the theatre of the totalitarian experiment in power:

*If we take totalitarian aspirations seriously and refuse to be misled by the common-sense assertion that they are utopian and unrealizable, it develops that the society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely. (Arendt 1979: 455-6)*

In other words, Arendt was aware of the limitations which reality imposes on the totalitarian system of rule. Countless critics have formulated this point as a fundamental criticism of Arendt's thesis, apparently and mistakenly believing that she had assimilated Nazi Germany and/or Stalinist Russia as ideal types, which in fact nowhere existed and which Arendt certainly did not set about inventing. Conversely, it has often been suggested that since neither Nazi Germany nor Stalinist Russia was entirely consistent with the theoretical construct articulated in *Origins*, Arendt *ipso facto* erred in describing them as totalitarian. Nonetheless, where such a system had fully manifested itself in localised pockets of organised and systematic bestiality, and notably in the camp systems of both societies, Arendt's conception of totalitarianism finds in them its most nearly ideal historical examples. For it was here that totalitarianism's incomparably destructive potential was realised. Nor is much comfort to be derived from Arendt's insight that the totalitarian system of government is self-destructive by definition, for at some point the system would have run out of victims if it were not destroyed by some external intervention (Germany's military defeat) or by some internal occurrence (such as Stalin's death and the process of 'detotalitarianisation').

### *Radical evil*

We may be unaccustomed to thinking in these contingent terms, preferring to view history in the light of comforting grand narratives, the 'rise and fall', 'progress and reaction', 'good versus evil'. It is perhaps natural that we try to explain 'radical evil' as the manifestation of a historical epoch, a typical product of modern civilisation, of a specific culture, or as Götz Aly persistently argues, 'a possibility inherent in European civilisation itself' (Aly 1996: 153)[xxv]. In 1954, Raymond Aron dismissed Isaac Deutscher's 'superficial and erroneously objective book' which seeks a comprehensive explanation of totalitarianism in terms of socio-economic circumstances (Aron 1993: 371). And yet he too insists that 'the

totalitarian essence did not arise mysteriously, fully armed, out of the mind of History or the mind of Stalin. Certain circumstances favoured its emergence, and others will foster its disappearance' (Aron 1993: 373). Aron thus also evokes a grand explanation of how all of this could have happened, as well as implying that what came into being will necessarily exit the stage of history forever, due to certain unspecified 'circumstances'. The disappearance of Nazi totalitarianism was not 'fostered'; it was fought and defeated in the bloodiest war in history. Although Stalin's death marked a fundamental shift away from total terror as practised in the Gulag and purge regime, Russia today still struggles to come to terms with her terror-filled past. Even after Stalin's death, there was nothing preventing a continuation of his policies. Aron chides Arendt, suggesting that she had defined 'a functioning regime by an essence [mass terror] that implies the impossibility of its functioning' (ibid.: 374). But that is not at all what Arendt suggests; she posits the impossibility of that regime's long-term em>survival (see e.g. Arendt 1979: 478). Totalitarian regimes are by definition self-destructive, but the destructive process can last for decades; it can be interrupted (the Soviet Union during the war years); and it can be channelled outwards (Germany during the war years). But just because a particular totalitarian regime has come to an end does not mean that the totalitarian phenomenon is no longer a threat. How many world wars must be fought before we learn this elementary lesson?

Arendt, then, is sensitive to the differing modalities of totalitarian rule, including the uneven intensity and virulence of that rule over time. None of this suggests that Arendt 'presented totalitarianism as a kind of essence, invulnerable to the erosion of time' (Aron 1980: 37). Her description of the transition to a post-Stalin Soviet regime stresses that Stalin's death in 1953, rather than his total military victory eight years earlier, marked the passage to 'an authentic, though never unequivocal, process of detotalitarianization' (Arendt 1979: xxv; see xxxiv-v). In other words, unlike Germany, whose total defeat and occupation heralded a precipitous end of totalitarian rule, Stalin's death inaugurated a process of detotalitarianisation that signalled a shift away from the extremes of Stalinism, without necessarily meaning that totalitarianism had run its course either in the Soviet Union or occupied Eastern Europe. Still, a moderation of Communist rule and a reduction of mass terror coincided with the 'stabilisation' of the Soviet dictatorship.

The ease with which these regimes were established, and the fact that no

exceptional human qualities were required for their evils to flourish, suggests that 'the wind had only to blow in the right direction, and the evil spread like wildfire' (Todorov 1999: 125). Todorov quotes the former Nazi governor of Austria and Holland, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who responded in characteristic fashion to former camp commander Rudolf Hoess's testimony in Nuremberg concerning the exterminations at Auschwitz:

*There is a limit to the number of people you can kill out of hatred or lust for slaughter ... but there is no limit to the number you can kill in the cold, systematic manner of the military 'categorical imperative'. (Seyss-Inquart in Todorov 1999: 125)*

Todorov takes up another of Arendt's controversial themes, suggesting that the exceptional nature of perpetrators of these mass crimes derives from the political regime under which they live; 'the explanation will be political and social, not primarily psychological or individual' [xxvi]. Moreover, Todorov shares Arendt's concern that overemphasising 'national character' deflects attention from the novel system of government that made a regime of total terror possible. Totalitarianism, in Todorov's view, borrowed the principle, common enough in the thought of nineteenth century imperialists, according to which 'he who is not with me is against me', and transforming it into the injunction 'all who are against me shall perish' (Todorov 1999: 126; see Arendt 1979: 380-1). Nor, argues Todorov, does the novelty of totalitarianism consist in this alone. For it was only once the 'other' of imperialist politics was redefined from being an external geographic entity to that of an 'internal enemy' that totalitarianism established itself as a novel system of government. Theoretically, it matters little, as both Arendt and Todorov argue, whether race and ethnicity define this enemy, or whether it is coincident with a social category, such as class:

*Totalitarian ideologies always divide humanity into two groups of unequal worth (which are not coincident with the categories of 'our country' and 'other countries', for here we are not dealing with simple nationalism) and maintain that the inferior beings must be punished, even annihilated. (Todorov 1999: 127)*

Class enemies in one case, race enemies in the other, the totalitarian regime lays hold on the capacity of the individual to make moral judgements about his own standards of conduct. The totalitarian regime imposes itself as an intermediary between the individual and his values, displacing humanity as the standard by

which to distinguish good from evil. In this way the totalitarian system aspires to control the totality of human relations. Although this aspiration is only ever realised in anything like a 'total' form in the camp system, for Todorov this means that totalitarianism is a point of departure for analysing these regimes. Echoing Arendt's sense of the camp system as the concentrated essence of these regimes, Todorov describes total terror as a 'repudiation of universality', a rejection of the notion of a common humanity, which most emphatically sets it apart from Western political and philosophical modernity (ibid.). Hence the importance of Arendt's historical method of discerning the 'elements' of social and political modernity that are present in the ideologies and 'crystalline' structure of the uniquely totalitarian system of government. Yet Arendt does not share Todorov's view that the logic of 'us' and 'them' distinguishes total terror. Rather this logic is characteristic of the pre-power phase in which the totalitarian movement defines itself in relation to 'the whole world' (Arendt 1979: 367). Conversely, total terror posits the elimination of all distinction and the uniform subjection of all mankind to its overriding 'idea'. The logic identified by Todorov is indicative of the initial stages of total rule (especially in Germany), but it is not coincident with a totalitarian regime in which 'all men have become equally superfluous'.

## *Conclusion*

*They were zealots of meaning and haters of empirical truth. (George Kateb)*

With the description of the concentration camps as the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule we are returned to the question of the relation between Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and her post-*Origins* theoretical project. *Origins* has a rich array of philosophical subtexts, each of which is explored further in Arendt's later essays, lectures and major works. However, the camp phenomenon is paradigmatic for Arendt's understanding of the twentieth century. As Samir Gandesha argues, for Arendt the *Lager* constitutes the definitive experience of the twentieth century because

*... as a sphere wholly fabricated by human beings, it is the space not simply where 'everything is permitted' in the moral sense but rather [where] 'everything is possible' in an ontological sense. The Lager represents the eclipse of zoon politikon by homo faber. (Gandeshi 2004: 446)*

For Arendt, the sheer horror of the camps resides in the fact that they actualise

the total negation of the political, both as a way of life and as an existential possibility, reducing the specifically human life to life as such.

Nonetheless, in my view Gandesha subtly misreads Arendt's interpretation of both modernity and the *Lager*. For if Arendt detects a powerful anti-political undercurrent in Western modernity, she hardly argues that the latter 'rests on the progressive eclipse of the political', nor that the *Lager* represents the 'culmination' of a historical process (Gandesha 2004: 464). Arendt does not view history in this sense as a succession of discreet periods, each imbued with a unique telos. Totalitarianism was for Arendt a paradigmatic example of the 'event', which cannot be deduced from that which came before it:

*I hinted at this in two short paragraphs of the Preface [of Origins], where I warned the reader against the concepts of Progress and Doom as 'two sides of the same medal' as well as against any attempt at 'deducing the unprecedented from precedents'. These two approaches are closely interconnected (Arendt 1953c: 404).*

To Arendt's mind 'phenomenal differences ... as differences of factuality are all-important' (ibid.: 404-05).

To conflate totalitarianism with Western modernity is to treat a novel phenomenon as some

*... minor outgrowth of some 'essential sameness' of a doctrinal nature. Numerous affinities between totalitarianism and some other trends in Occidental political or intellectual history have been described with this result, in my opinion: they all failed to point out the distinct quality of what was actually happening. The 'phenomenal differences', far from 'obscuring' some essential sameness, are those phenomena which make totalitarianism 'totalitarian', which distinguish this form of government and movement from all others and therefore can alone help us in finding its essence. What is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the event of totalitarian domination itself. (ibid.: 405)*

Arendt rejects liberal notions of 'Progress' and Hegelian-Marxist dialectics as symptoms of a way of thinking that posits an end-point in history. Arendt regards this way of thinking and this understanding of history not only as misguided, but as positively dangerous. To her mind, as we have seen, the story told by history 'is a story with many beginnings but no end' (Arendt 1953b: 399). Diagnosing the ills

of history in terms of 'Progress' or 'Doom', or any other meta-narrative or philosophy of history, submerges the particular in an ocean of 'sameness', distinguishable if at all merely by degree. It is to reduce totalitarianism to an essence of something else, in this case 'modernity', but also to equate it with that other. Arendt detects in this thinking the logic of ideological thinking whose search for historical essences aims to disclose the future unfolding of events. Dismissing 'psychologism' and 'sociologism' as the chief culprits in this regard, Arendt nonetheless also challenges contemporary trends in the historical and political sciences, and most especially their 'growing incapacity to make distinctions'. The tendency to employ terms like nationalism, imperialism and totalitarianism indiscriminately strips them of their meaning and extinguishes the particular and unique facets of any given historical event or context. The resultant generalisations consist of a confused agglomeration of analogies and reductionist arguments that conceal the 'new' and the 'shocking'. Precedent substitutes for explanation, and novel historical phenomena are reduced 'to a previously known chain of causes and influences' (ibid.: 407). In my view, only if we comprehend Arendt's sense of the sheer novelty of the totalitarian phenomenon are we able to appreciate the philosophical dimension and implications of her analysis, which I shall explore in the final chapter of *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of her Time*. In the present context, and by way of concluding remarks to this essay, I should like to draw out certain important aspects of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism as a major contribution to twentieth century political theory.

Most importantly, and controversially, Arendt contends that totalitarianism constitutes the first novel form of government to emerge in the two and a half thousand years that separate the world of Plato from that of Kant. Her totalitarianism thesis rests on the relation between novel forms of ideology and terror on the one hand, and on the other on her distinction between law understood as the positive laws establishing a *consensus iuris* and her notion of totalitarian 'lawfulness'. A regime of positive laws delimits a stable common world in which constant human motion and change unfolds; a space of freedom erecting boundaries and establishing 'channels of communication between men whose community is continually endangered by the new men born into it' (Arendt 1979: 465). This common world regulates the destabilising potential inherent in human plurality – the uniqueness of each human individual born into this world – and is sustained by a 'people's' implicit act of consent to the regulating principle of universally valid moral and legal standards that govern all civilised societies, even

in extreme circumstances such as war. The constitution of a 'people', then, is an act of *political* consent recognised as such by all its members, because they so regard themselves (ibid.: 462, 467). On this understanding, the highest good of all constitutional polities is the welfare of men.

Tyranny, by contrast, serves the interests of one man. The arbitrary lawlessness and fear coincident with tyrannical government presuppose the erasure of man-made laws, the arbiter in matters of human welfare. The arbitrary will of the dictator corresponds in practice to the elimination of individual liberties and the destruction of freedom as a living political reality, creating a 'fenceless wilderness of fear and suspicion'. Still, lawlessness does not entirely eliminate the individual capacity for purposeful actions, even if a regime of arbitrary rule means that actions are 'fear-guided' and 'suspicion-ridden' (ibid.: 466). For suspicion and fear are the principles of action in tyranny, and the use of terror in tyrannical forms of government serves the utilitarian purpose of frightening and exterminating real opponents (ibid.: 6). The very notion of tyranny would be incomprehensible were it not for the existence of an authentic opposition, whose provocation or resistance threatens the boundless will of the ruler. In these circumstances the self-interested ruler exercises terror in order to secure arbitrary power unrestricted by law and unopposed by human agency. Hence the relation between tyranny and terror is one of necessity, and it is general lawlessness rather than the instrumentality of terror that define tyranny (ibid.: 322). In all of Western history, then, the opposition between a government grounded in law and forms of tyrannical rule has constituted a fundamental principle of our political self-understanding. And this is one reason why Arendt rejects the view, as expressed for example by Carole Adams, that totalitarian regimes may be distinguished from historical forms of tyranny only insofar as they engage modern 'technocratic methods' to establish total control over their subjects (Adams 1989: 41).

In Arendt's view, totalitarianism collapses the classical distinction between lawful and lawless government, legitimate and arbitrary power (Arendt 1979: 461). Historically the nature of government was susceptible to the distinction between lawful, constitutional or republican government on the one hand, and lawless, arbitrary, or tyrannical government on the other. Wherever totalitarian regimes come into being they obliterate social, legal and political traditions, evolving new political institutions in accordance with 'a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense



utilitarian categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict their course of action' (ibid.: 460). Total domination, as distinct from despotic or tyrannical forms of political oppression, rests on the perverse but 'seemingly unanswerable' claim that,

*... far from being 'lawless', it goes to the source of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these suprahuman forces than any government ever was before. (ibid.: 461)*

Totalitarian rule, like tyranny, is 'lawless' insofar as it defies positive law. Yet unlike tyranny, totalitarian rule is not arbitrary for it obeys 'suprahuman forces' grounded in a principle of legitimacy that transcends the utilitarian basis of positive law. An extra-historical principle of legitimation – in the case of Nazi Germany what Arendt terms the 'law of Nature', and in the parallel case of Stalinism the 'law of History' – governs everyone, including the Leader. The objective, impersonal character of totalitarian 'lawfulness' derives from the fact that these laws are applied to the 'species', rather than establishing standards of right and wrong for individual human beings (Arendt 1954a: 340). Arendt acknowledges that positive law plays a role in totalitarian societies, moreover that these regimes, too, pass new laws of this kind, as for example the Nuremberg laws (Arendt 1953a: 300). Nonetheless, these regimes defy not only those positive laws that they inherit but even those which are of their own making[xxvii].

### *Nature and History*

The key to this dimension of Arendt's totalitarianism thesis is her contention that totalitarian regimes invert the customary relation between law and men. The aim of terror is to unleash the law of movement which 'races freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action' (Arendt 1979: 465). The chief aim of the extra-legal device of total terror is to 'stabilise' men in order to release the forces of nature or history. The inversion of the relation between law and men in the totalitarian scheme of things thus targets the traditional association of law with the constitution of a stable polity, which establishes the legal boundaries of free actions and associations that are prerequisites of all civilised societies. Totalitarian 'lawfulness' targets this fundamental principle of legality that underpins the body politic understood as a *consensus iuris*. By eliminating the function of legality and recasting the concept of law in pseudo-natural terms, law is made to serve those who 'understand the dynamic processes of nature or

history and go along with them' (Canovan 1996: 18).

Nature and History cease to be a source of authority and are transformed into 'movements'. But since mankind is the sole carrier or embodiment of these laws of History or Nature, Arendt must account for a principle of action in totalitarian regimes. She argues, on the one hand, that the logicity of ideological thinking generates an all-encompassing system 'of explanation of life and world', which is actualised in the indiscriminate application of terror (Arendt 1954a: 349-50):

*Terror substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men an iron band which presses them so tightly together that it is as though ... they were only one man. (ibid.: 342)*

Terror eliminates the space of free action by eliminating the space between men, executing the laws of Nature or History which have already decided the identity and fate of the victims, who are swept away by the stream of historical necessity (ibid.: 343). The complete elimination of spaces of political and individual freedom introduces both a new form of government and a new criterion of typological understanding. Our conventional understanding of the opposition between lawful and lawless is no more able to apprehend totalitarian 'lawfulness' than Montesquieu's 'principles of action' can explain the actions of either government or governed in totalitarian societies. Under totalitarian conditions, both the function of law in constitutional polities and the principle of action in all non-totalitarian forms of government are displaced by terror, which 'as the essence of government is perfectly sheltered from the disturbing and irrelevant interference of human wishes and needs ... [so that] no principle of action in Montesquieu's sense is necessary' (Arendt 1954a: 343). This 'essence has itself become movement - totalitarian government is only insofar as it is kept in constant motion' (ibid.: 344). This is the reason why Arendt argues that law, human agency and stable political institutions are all antithetical to totalitarian rule. It is also why ideology and terror are essential to totalitarian rule. To be kept in motion, totalitarian societies must be deprived of all social and psychological markers, common sense expectations, and utilitarian calculations. Power thus serves different ends in tyrannical and totalitarian regimes. The tyrant exercises terror in order to eliminate his opponents and thereby secure and consolidate his power. The totalitarian dictator, on the other hand, eliminates all opposition as a prerequisite for establishing a condition of 'total domination', which entails a great deal more than securing mere personal power, since the Leader is the agent

of the laws of Nature or History. In other words, the totalitarian dictator must himself conform to 'laws higher than himself'. The Hegelian understanding of freedom as comprehension of 'necessity' is thus transcended by the totalitarian elevation of necessity to an absolute coercive principle – not of action, but of submission to the objective laws of historical movement (ibid.: 346).

The totalitarian ruler is possessed of an absolute ideological fidelity. This means that the Leader understands the objective laws of movement and the imperative of accelerating that movement towards a predetermined outcome. From this perspective, all principles and all motives, including the dictator's self-interest, are subordinated to the imperative of actualising the 'idea' (ibid.: 353). This faith, grounded in an axiomatically accepted premise from which a total explanation of history is deduced, is the 'totalitarian ideology', which collapses the customary means-end calculation into a welter of bloody terror without any apparent end (ibid.: 302). In the camp system the 'isolation' of the fear-guided subject of tyranny becomes the 'loneliness' of the totalitarian subject. In the camps 'terror enforces oblivion' (Arendt 1979: 443) whereas even 'one's own death is no longer one's own' (Villa 1999: 19). The complete absence of even a semblance of strategic rationality is most usually viewed as a manifestation of the 'irrationality' of fanaticism, or of pathological hatreds, or of the 'paranoid' personality of the dictator. Arendt acknowledges that these passions and pathologies manifested themselves in both Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia. Nonetheless, she insists that total terror, by shattering the means-end calculation, reveals itself as the 'very essence of such a government' (Arendt 1953a: 305; see 302-03). Positive law and political authority are deprived of their *raison d'être*. In a system in which total terror is employed for the purpose of actualising an ideological interpretation of reality at any cost, politics entails relentless destruction and equally relentless reconstruction. The fabricated universe envisaged by totalitarian ideologists is set in motion by the totalitarian movement, which seizes on the 'idea' and stumbles upon the reality that world-organising fictions can be realised. The proof of this lies in the many half-forgotten Polish forests and frozen Russian wastelands.

And yet it is precisely Arendt's comparative approach to Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism that has elicited the most vociferous and enduring of all the controversies that have accompanied *Origins* into our century. This charge revolves around the notion that *Origins* is little more than a brilliantly conceived

Cold War propaganda prop.

Read Part One: <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=3099>

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## NOTES

**[i]** Arendt contends that 'it is this expectation that lies behind the claim to global rule of all totalitarian governments' (Arendt 1954a: 340). This view is a touchstone of Arendt's distinction between Fascism and Nazism. For she argues that Fascism is predicated on a doctrine of extreme nationalism whereas National Socialism envisages an extra-territorial regime constituted by a German racial *Grossraum*.

**[ii]** For this reason Arendt argues that totalitarianism attained its most nearly perfect form in the camp systems of the totalitarian dictatorships.

**[iii]** In this view, the 'law of Nature' and the 'law of History', the principles underpinning the ideologies of Nazism and Stalinist Communism respectively, although related, are irreducible to their theoretical antecedents in the thought of the social Darwinists and Marx respectively. Making this point *vis-à-vis* Marx and Marxism is clearly controversial and fraught with theoretical complexities. Arendt was aware of this, as can be gleaned from her largely unpublished reflections on Marxism. In the published manuscript *Karl Marx*, Arendt acknowledges this question as 'the most formidable charge ever raised against Marx [which moreover] cannot be brushed off as easily as can charges of a similar nature - against Nietzsche, Hegel, Luther, or Plato, all of whom, and many more, have at one time or another been accused of being the ancestors of Nazism' (Arendt 2002: 274). Yet the emergence of totalitarianism in diverse circumstances, and in the guise of totally distinct ideologies, suggested to Arendt that Marx cannot be accused of bringing forth the specifically totalitarian aspects of Bolshevik domination.

**[iv]** Arendt notes that 'logic' in this sense denotes a 'movement of thought' rather than its more usual connotation as a necessary control of thinking (Arendt 1979: 469).

**[v]** Arendt attributes this to the conspiratorial nature of ideological thought. In the case of Nazi Germany, the alleged Jewish threat is cast as a Jewish world conspiracy, manifesting itself historically as a multi-faceted assault by Jewish

capitalists and Bolsheviks, and in Nazi propaganda as the-Jew-as-parasite. Jewish support for the Allied war effort merely served to reinforce this propaganda image of the Jewish people. The fact that Hitler launched the war and planned to exterminate European Jewry could thus be portrayed by the Nazis as 'pre-emptive' or defensive measures. The alleged Jewish world conspiracy thus serves the purpose of concealing the fact that it was the Nazis, rather than the Jews, who were guilty of a world conspiracy.

**[vi]** 'Organisation' was not merely a technical device of the totalitarian leadership but a lived experience of the totalitarian subjects and a pervasive mode of existence even for the inmates of the camp system. The *Sonderkommando* member Filip Müller notes that the crematorium workers in Auschwitz 'spent a great deal of energy on *organizing*'. Everything from the processing of corpses and the optimal combinations of corpses in each oven to the '*organizing*' of gold teeth, diamonds and other valuables for the black market trade in alcohol and cigarettes and the elaborate measures adopted for deceiving incoming transports – this all and more was subject to ceaseless organisation. Even the undressing antechamber of the gas chambers was organised to minimise panic. Numbered clothes hooks for retrieving clothing after 'showering' and 'disinfection' and signposting that read 'Cleanliness brings freedom' and 'One louse may kill you' were part of an elaborate and ceaselessly evolving regime of terror (Müller 1999: 60-2). The point is that even the death camps were subject to the organisational devices of the regime and were the most nearly perfect realisation of the essence of totalitarian rule.

**[vii]** Victor Klemperer's diary entry of June 7, 1942, employs the metaphor of a 'gas boiler' to convey part of Arendt's meaning here: '*Every* idea is present in almost every age as a tiny individual flame. The racial idea, anti-Semitism, the Communist idea, the National Socialist one, faith, atheism – every idea. How does it come about that suddenly *one* of these ideas grips a whole generation and becomes dominant? – If I had read [Alfred] Rosenberg's *Myth [of the Twentieth Century]* in 1930, when it appeared, I would certainly have judged it to be a tiny flame, the crazy product of an individual, of a small unbalanced group. I would never have believed that the little flame could set anything alight – set anything alight in Germany!' (Klemperer 2000: 83). Klemperer shares Arendt's insight that totalitarian movements identify elemental prejudices and historical currents susceptible to a comprehensive reordering in terms of their 'suprasensible', ideological presuppositions.

**[viii]** The stereotype of Hitler presiding over a *monolithic* regime of a

hierarchically structured governmental authority is as misleading as attempts to portray Hitler's system of government as all chaos and irrationality. Martin Moll's recent article, '*Steuerungsinstrument im 'Ämterchaos'?*' (2001), is a particularly balanced appraisal of this highly controversial dimension of Hitler's rule. As we shall see, Arendt describes the 'anarchy of authority' characteristic of the Third Reich in more complex terms, rejecting the notion of a mere 'duplication of offices and division of authority, the co-existence of real and ostensible power' which, although 'sufficient to create confusion', cannot adequately explain 'the "shapelessness" of the whole structure' (Arendt 1979: 398f) of the Third reich.

**[ix]** Arato argues that Lenin's dictatorship was the vantage point from which Stalin's second revolution was carried out. He dismisses Arendt's alleged view, in his words, that 'the conspiratorial party led by Stalin carried out a revolution against the party of Lenin', contending instead that rather than a 'conspiratorial elite, it was the official political apparatus led by Stalin's secretariat that gained control of this party even before Lenin's death in 1923' (Arato,2002: 481). If this is true, what then is the secretariat in a one-party dictatorship other than an 'elite', one that schemes from within party structures to gain 'control of this party' and eliminate 'all possible opposition in preparation for the revolution from above'? (Arato,2002: 481). Is Arato suggesting that Lenin knew of Stalin's plan, half a decade hence, to launch a second revolution? And if Lenin did not, did that development not signal a break with Lenin's revolutionary goals, however one wishes to describe these?

**[x]** In *Origins*, Arendt argues that '*Terror as the counterpart of propaganda* played a greater role in Nazism than in Communism. The Nazis did not strike at prominent figures as had been done in the earlier wave of political killings in Germany ... instead, by killing small socialist functionaries or influential members of opposing parties, they attempted to prove to the population the dangers involved in mere membership' (Arendt 1979: 344; emphasis added).

**[xi]** 'All of our categories of thought and standards for judgement seem to explode in our hands the instant we try to apply them here... Fear cannot possibly be a reliable guide if what I am constantly afraid of can happen to me regardless of anything I do... One can of course say... that in this case the means have become the ends. But this is not really an explanation. It is a confession, disguised as a paradox, that the category of means and ends no longer works' (Arendt 1953a: 302).

**[xii]** As Robert Conquest argues, Stalin 'was always much concerned with forms and appearances' as when, for example, state prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky

argued for a 'restoration' of 'legal norms and forms, insisting on trials, with evidence'. Whereas Robert Thurston attributes substance to these measures, Conquest argues that Vyshinsky was hardly engaged in advancing the rule of law. He was merely regularising the application of terror (Conquest 1996: 47).

**[xiii]** Klemperer notes the effect of the incremental terror upon the category of 'privileged Jews' (principally those in mixed marriages and of mixed parentage who were not immediate victims of incarceration): 'The *Jews*' *boundless fear*. I was at Simon's ... and afterwards called on Glaser. Glaser was so distracted with fear ... begged me never to tell him anything about foreign reports - torture could force one to make statements ... he did not want to know anything he was not allowed to know' (Klemperer 2000: 413, see 438, 477).

**[xiv]** It is not clear how Raymond Aron can claim that during this period 'the [Nazi] police were looking for genuine opponents (as was demonstrated by the attempt on Hitler's life on 29 July 1944)' (Aron 1980: 37). The operation to rout the principal coup members constituted one of the rare instances in which the Nazi police targeted *real* enemies, rather than biological non-conformists such as Jews, Sinti and Roma, physically and mentally disabled, the aged, homosexuals and Slavs. This hardly amounts to proving Aron's rule. The period 1942-44 marked the height of the genocide in occupied Europe. It is unclear how Villa can argue that this fact places in question 'any strong insistence upon the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Like it or not, Arendt's theoretical concern with the "essence of totalitarianism" leads her to frame the attempted extermination of the Jews as but one step in a broader process aimed at total domination' (Villa 1999: 25). Arendt's theoretical concerns are, indeed, much broader than the historical uniqueness of the attempted annihilation of an entire people. But that fact in no way rests upon a judgement about the uniqueness of the German genocide of the Jews. For the genocide of the Jews was a unique facet of a broader programme that envisaged the extermination of substantial swaths of Eastern Europe's Slavs (Arendt 1946a: 200; Arendt 1950a: 244n; Arendt 1951: 290; see Burleigh 2001: 598; Kershaw 2000: 353, 355-60, 400-07, 461-95). The planned Slav extermination would in all probability have exceeded in numbers even a completed Jewish programme (10 million) with the difference that the genocide of the Jews was envisaged as *total*. Arendt insists that 'the monstrosities of the Nazi regime should have warned us that we are dealing here with something inexplicable even by reference to the worst period in history' (Arendt 1945a: 109). For Arendt, it was not the shock of the year 1933 that was decisive but, instead, 'the day we learned about Auschwitz' (Arendt 1964a: 13), a policy '*beyond the capacities of human*

*comprehension* ... and beyond the reach of human justice ... Human history has known no story more difficult to tell' (Arendt 1946a: 198, 199). The fact that Arendt cites the planned extermination of Slavs hardly amounts to explaining away the posited uniqueness of the genocide of the Jews. Moreover, why should we 'like it or not' that Arendt does not restrict her vision to the fate of European Jewry?

**[xv]** Todorov argues that life in totalitarian societies typically entails everyone's becoming 'an accomplice; everyone is both inmate and guard, victim and executioner' (Todorov 2000: 247).

**[xvi]** In the Soviet Union, where the arrest of a spouse had immediate implications for the security of the family unit as a whole, divorce was often the only means of insulating the family from guilt by association. Thus even the most cherished of personal bonds could be made into instruments of terror, and the integrity of human relations and solidarity could be transformed into an existential threat (see e.g. Khlevniuk 2004: 168-9). The role of denunciation in German society, on the other hand, is wholly underreported and under-theorised in the historical and theoretical literature, as Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann argues in his important essay, '*Der Blockwart*' (2000; see Arendt's analysis of this aspect of the Soviet Terror (1979: 452)). The essay explores the interrelation between the intention of the regime and the structure of the system of 'block' and 'cell' leaders of local party organisations.

**[xvii]** Filip Müller, a former inmate and member of the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommandos* (inmate units assigned to the gas chambers and crematoria to 'process' human remains) notes that a '*Kapo*', or inmate supervisor, who had previously treated his fellow inmates with particular brutality, upon noticing 'that the other *Kapos* abhorred ill-treating prisoners', immediately ceased his brutality (Müller 1999: 59). In other words, separated from his fellow *Kapos* this individual was bereft of social markers, 'over-fulfilling' his task by maximising the exercise of brutality.

**[xviii]** Richard Overy describes the camps as 'cruel mirrors in which dictatorship confronted its own hideously magnified and distorted image' (Overy 2004: 595).

**[xix]** An important distinction needs to be drawn between the camp system under the jurisdiction of the SS camp inspectorate (which included all of the larger and better known camps and was itself sub-divided into many departments) and the great number of smaller camps administered, *inter alia*, by the police, Gestapo, industrial concerns, and military.

**[xx]** It is also an important distinguishing characteristic of the extermination



facilities which, with the notable exception of Auschwitz, were situated in 'secret' locations. Yet as Ian Kershaw argues, the nature of the rumours doing the rounds in Germany during the war left little to the imagination. Surviving SD records detail the nature of these 'rumours', and it is a well-researched fact that soldiers returning from the front conveyed accurate information to family members and friends (Kershaw 1988: 145-58; Westerman 2005: 237-9). Much personal correspondence has survived. In many instances soldiers describe mass executions of civilians in which regular army units of the *Wehrmacht* were directly involved (see e.g. Westerman 2005: 188-91). Victor Klemperer throughout the war notes discussion among German civilians of the atrocities carried out, *inter alia*, by the regular military (see e.g. Klemperer 2000: 50, 424, 454, 462, 479). Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess extensively document military involvement in massacres and the activities of the extermination camps (Klee, Dressen and Riess 1991).

**[xxi]** There were six extermination facilities: Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Bernburg, Hartheim, Sonnenstein, and Hadamer. After suspension of the programme in August 1941 T4 switched tactics to enlisting regular staff members at a great many mental institutions across the Reich (approximately 50 to 60) to murder individual victims by way of lethal injection, starvation, or a combination of these methods, in what became known as the 'Luminal schedule'. The killing lasted until the close of war. In one instance, in Kaufbeuren in Bavaria, killing continued two months *after* the German surrender; that is, two months *after* American troops had occupied the town, and was stopped by a chance discovery of the activities (De Mildt 1996: 65, 66, 67; see von Cranach, Greene and Bar-On 2003).

**[xxii]** The victims of the Euthanasia programme were not restricted to 'medical' categories determined by departmental selection criteria. As De Mildt shows, the attendant 'experts' hardly ever examined the patients, sentencing them to death on the basis of registration certificates received from medical practitioners across greater Germany. These forms were perused with extraordinary speed (reviews lasting two minutes were customary) and much of the information contained in them was inaccurate. Many doctors, fearing the loss of capable workers in their institutions, exaggerated the mental or physical disabilities of their charges for fear of losing them to Brack's team, which was ostensibly seeking qualified workers for the armaments industry. This constituted a death sentence (De Mildt 1996: 57-9).

**[xxiii]** An abbreviation of its Berlin address, Tiergartenstrasse 4. T4 was the headquarters of the Euthanasia programme, which was known as the

*Reichsausschuss zur wissenschaftlichen Erfassung von erb- und anlagebedingten schweren Leiden*. It was headed by Viktor Brack under the supervision of Hitler's personal physician, Karl Brandt and *Rechtsleiter* Philipp Bouhler, who headed Hitler's *Führer* Chancellery. The latter, *Kanzlei des Führers (KdF)*, was independent of the Party Chancellery (*Partei Kanzlei*) and the *Reichs* Chancellery (*Reichskanzlei*). Initially conceived of to attend to Hitler's private affairs, it soon grew into a large bureaucratic organisation with five main departments. Department II, under Brack, supervised the Euthanasia programme. To conceal Hitler's personal involvement the *T4* premises, occupied in 1940, served as the base for the activities of Department II of the *KdF*, and in turn created four additional front organisations managing the four main dimensions of the Euthanasia programme: mental institutions, finance, transport, and nursing fees and health insurance. Dr Albert Widmann describes the early experiment in killing methods as follows: 'For the experiment 30 mentally ill patients had been selected and divided into two groups. One group was led into the gas chamber of the institution, in which CO-gas was poured in. Meanwhile the other group was given injections with Scopolamine and other poisons. Whereas with the [former] unconsciousness set in after a very short time, and death followed shortly afterwards, the results of the injections were ... so questionable that these patients had also to be taken to the gas chambers and killed with CO-gas' (Widmann in De Mildt 1996: 56-7).

**[xxiv]** Victor Brack's claim during the Nuremberg Trials that Jews were not included in the Euthanasia programme since the 'government did not want to grant this philanthropic act to the Jews', has been disproved (De Mildt 1996: 71). In their case, however, the killings were not registered.

**[xxv]** Aly argues that the German genocide was not a 'break with civilisation' but instead part of German and European history. Although it occurred in Europe, it was authored by a particular German regime that had broken entirely with Europe's Enlightenment tradition. Aly's thesis dilutes German responsibility for Nazism whilst impugning all of European civilisation. Speer employed a similar logic. During the Nuremberg trials Speer accepted global responsibility for all the criminal deeds of the regime, rather than for those for which he was personally responsible. This constituted a clever evasion of actual responsibility and was generally perceived by the victors as a courageous and unprecedented moral stand by a leading Nazi. This approach deflects, or at least dilutes, responsibility by embedding it in a broader context. This is guilt by association on a grand historical scale. Who are we to blame for Stalin's mass crimes? Are these the

‘Asiatic deeds’ or ‘reversion to barbarism’ that Aly rejects as an explanation for Hitler’s crimes? Or were the purges and Gulag regime ‘a possibility inherent in European civilisation itself’? (Aly 1996: 153). If so we would have considerably to expand the definition of Europe. This is not to deny the complicity of other European nations. Nor am I suggesting that the genocide be viewed in some essential sense as ‘German’. Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish between an erroneous metaphysics of European guilt and the historical fact that the ‘Final Solution’ was conceived and implemented by Germans and Austrians.

**[xxvi]** Arendt similarly argues that the reputed ‘magic spell’ cast by Hitler over his subordinates was owing to the fact that ‘[f]ascination is a social phenomenon, and the fascination Hitler exercised over his environment must be understood in terms of the particular company that he kept. Society is always prone to accept a person offhand for what he pretends to be, so that a crackpot posing as a genius always has a certain chance to be believed. In modern society, with its characteristic lack of discerning judgement, this tendency is strengthened, so that someone who not only holds opinions but also presents them in a tone of unshakeable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong ... The hair-raising arbitrariness of such fanaticism holds great fascination for society because for the duration of the social gathering it is freed from the chaos of opinions that it constantly generates’ (Arendt 1979: 305f).

**[xxvii]** J. Arch Getty argues that during the 1930s Stalin ‘was working to consolidate a modern legal order with reliable courts, respect for laws, and predictable punishments all in the interests of a strong centralised state’, only to be limited by the ‘interference of local politicians ... and his own resort to military-style campaigns to carry out specific policies: industrialisation, collectivisation, and mass operations being examples’ (Getty 2002: 114). The ubiquitous ‘mass operations’ were the terror campaigns against ‘categories rather than individuals’ discussed above. What is quite remarkable is the claim that all the while Stalin was launching mass terror campaigns for no apparent reason (industrialisation and collectivisation arguably did not presuppose mass killings) his real aim was the rule of law, judicial transparency, and orderly and good governance; moreover, that Stalin was prevented *by his own military-style campaigns* from attaining these noble goals. As we shall see in chapter five, the implicit assumption of a future perfect flowing from present ‘troubles’ is typical of several generations of revisionist historians, whose attempts to rationalise Stalin’s terror are often allied to attempts to debunk Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism.

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### **About the Author:**

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In September 2011, *Professor Anthony Court* of the College of Graduate Studies was awarded the UNISA Press, *Hidding Currie* prize for 2010. The Hidding Currie prize is awarded annually for academic or artistic work of the highest quality which contributes to the understanding or development of the discipline. Professor Court's book, entitled "*Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of Her Times*", was published in 2008 by Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam, and republished by UNISA Press in 2009. The book appeared in the bi-national SAVUSA Series, which aims to publish scientific, yet broadly accessible texts on historical and contemporary issues.

Professor Court's interest in Hannah Arendt's political thought grew out of his undergraduate studies in political philosophy and international relations at Munich University's Geschwister Scholl Institute in the 1980s. During this period, there was a resurgent interest in Arendt's political thought generally and her theory of totalitarianism more particularly. The author notes that Arendt's novel contributions to twentieth century political thought resist easy categorisation. Nevertheless, in his view there are few thinkers in Western history who share Arendt's unwavering sense for the political. A central argument of the book is that Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and her theory of politics can be traced back to her personal experience of the twentieth century phenomenon of "total domination". Although much of Arendt's early writings consist of reflections upon the harrowing phenomena of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, "total war" and genocide, Arendt's later works articulate a pluralistic theory of politics that is grounded in her concept of "natality". In Arendt's own words, new "beginnings" are without end, and each new beginning "is guaranteed by each new birth; it is

indeed every man”.

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# **Hannah Arendt - Zur Person - Full Interview (with English Subtitles)**

*Hannah Arendt in the Rozenberg Quarterly*

Anthony Court - Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism. Part One: <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=3099>

Anthony Court - Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism. Part Two: <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=3115>

Nima Emami - Hannah Arendt and The Green Movement: <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=563>

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# **Large Archive Of Hannah Arendt's Papers Digitized By The Library Of Congress: Read Her Lectures, Drafts Of Articles, Notes & Correspondence**

Many people read the German-Jewish political philosopher and journalist [Hannah Arendt](#) as something of an oracle, a secular prophet whose most famous works—her essay on [the trial of Adolf Eichmann](#) and her 1951 [Origins of Totalitarianism](#)—contain secrets about our own times of high nationalist fervor.

And indeed they may, but we should also keep in mind that Arendt's insights into the horrors of Nazism did not emerge until after the war.

Arendt did not identify as Jewish during the Nazi's rise to power, but as a fully assimilated German; she had a [romantic relationship with her professor Martin Heidegger](#), who became a doctrinaire Nazi, and she seemed to have little understanding of German antisemitism during the thirties and forties. Arendt, many have alleged, sometimes seemed too close to her subject.

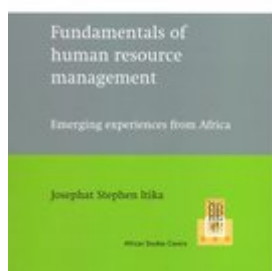
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# Josephat Stephen Itika ~ Fundamentals Of Human Resource Management: Emerging Experiences From Africa



*'Leaders must be guided by rules which lead to success.'*  
(Machiavelli: The Prince)



## Foreword

For over half a century now, most African people south of the Sahara are still living under political, social and economic hardships, which cannot be compared with the rest of the world. For many, the expectations of independence have remained a dream. This state of affairs has many explanations but it is fundamentally based on the nature of African countries and organisations on one

hand, and on the other hand there is over reliance on Eurocentric philosophies, theories, and assumptions on how administrators and managers should manage African countries, organisations, and people in such a way that will lead to prosperity. As a result, the same Eurocentric mindsets are used to develop solutions for African leaders and managers through knowledge codification and dissemination in the form of textbooks and the curricula in education systems.

Evidence from economies in South East Asian countries suggests that the success behind these countries is largely explained by high investment in human capital and, to some extent, avoiding wholesale reliance on the importing of northern concepts, values and ways of managing people; that is, the development of human resources capable of demonstrating management in setting and pursuing national, sector wide, and corporate vision, strategies, and commitment to a common cause within the context of their own countries and organisations. Similarly, African managers and leaders effectively cannot manage by merely importing Eurocentric knowledge without critical reflection, sorting and adaptation to suit the context they work in and with cautious understanding of the implications of globalisation in their day-to-day management practices. They have to understand and carefully interpret northern concepts and embedded assumptions, internalise and develop the best strategies and techniques for using them to address management problems in their organisations and countries, which are, by and large, Afrocentric.

Therefore, like Machiavelli, human resource managers, like leaders, must be guided by rules which lead to the success of their countries and organisations. The main challenge facing human resource managers now is to know which rules are necessary and when applied would lead to effective human resource management results in different types of public and private sector organisations and contexts. This is a difficult question to answer. However, we can start by learning one small step at a time from the emerging experiences of our own practices of human resource management in Africa and elsewhere.

This book on *'Fundamentals of human resource management: Emerging Experiences from African Countries'* has just made a small step in the journey of establishing a link between Eurocentric concepts, philosophies, values, theories, principles and techniques in human resource management and understanding of what is happening in African organisations. This will form part of the groundwork of unpacking what works and what does not work well in African organisational

contexts and shed more light on emerging synergistic lessons for the future. The book has fourteen chapters each addressing important issues in human resource management in terms of the Eurocentric approach and reflecting on what is happening in African governments and organisations at the end of each chapter.

*Chapter 1* starts to lay the foundations of human resource management, on which the rest of the book is anchored. It covers theoretical issues and historical trends in the evolution and development of human resource management as a discipline and a profession.

*Chapter 2* sets the basis for using a strategic approach to manage human resources and the link between corporate strategy and strategic human resource management. It establishes the changing role of human resource managers from that of managing routine functions into a strategic business partner where human resource management functions are decentralised to lower departments and sections.

*Chapter 3* is concerned with human resource policies as the step following strategic choices in people management. Policies are useful in guiding managers to ensure that organisations have the right number and quality of staff at any particular point in time.

*Chapter 4* covers the fundamentals of employee resourcing and addresses key issues in human resource planning at micro, meso and macro level. It also considers challenges facing management on decision making in financing human resource plans.

*Chapter 5* investigates recruitment and selection. Our experience is that all managers and administrators are involved in one way or another in human resource recruitment and selection and require knowledge, skills and techniques for getting people into organisations. Special emphasis is put on the use of appropriate selection techniques and tools, particularly assessment centres. The most successful organisations have the best strategies to utilise staff and measure their performance.

This is covered in *chapter 6*, which is devoted to performance management systems, processes, techniques and measurements. There is always a link between reward and performance. The employee's performance should be recognised through the provision of appropriate rewards.

*Chapter 7* describes the development of appropriate reward systems for effectively utilising human resources.

*Chapter 8* is about human resource development partly as recognition that



improved performance is achieved through continuous training and development but also that training and development are essential rewards. When employees join organisations they have their own needs, expectations and interests as individuals and as a part of a team. Likewise, employers do not engage staff without needs, expectations and interests to be met and which may not necessarily be compatible with those of the employees. Therefore, the relationship between these two parties has to be effectively managed in order to have a harmonious work place.

*Chapter 9* is devoted to the relationship employees have with their management. With globalisation and the emergence of many multinational corporations, managing human resource, which is diverse in nature within multinationals, is of increasing concern for managers. Therefore, the legal framework which governs the relationships between employees, employers and trade union in Tanzania is given emphasis. One of the strongly emerging developments in human resource management discipline is a shift from traditional human resource management to competency based human resource management whereby the identification, utilisation, rewarding, measurement and developing of talents and competencies are becoming critical in determining organisational competitiveness and sustainability.

Therefore, *chapter 10* underscores the importance of talent and competency based human resource management in competitive organisations.

The ongoing reforms in both public and private sector organisations and the efforts to promote foreign direct investment in Africa have started to bear fruits that pose many challenges on managing multicultural workforce.

*Chapter 11* looks at the international perspectives of human resource management as recognition of the emerging challenges and emphasis on the need to re-examine the best ways to manage people in a globalise world.

*Chapter 12* is more practical and based Tanzanian experiences. It focuses on the link between recruitment and open performance appraisal in Tanzanian public service by identifying the mismatch between recruitment and selection and open performance appraisal and recommends an alternative model.

*Chapter 13* links theory and practice in human resource management for health in general and more specifically in local authorities in Tanzania. The main focus is on recruitment and retention strategies and the challenges faced in health service provision.

*Chapter 14* is on the human resource management in a private foreign company for the purposes of drawing lessons from other private sector organisations that

are now the engine of economic growth in Tanzania. The chapter covers policies and procedures governing day-to-day people management.

It will be noted with emphasis that in each chapter there is a reflection on what is going on in some Tanzanian and other African countries and organisations. It is important that readers make use of these lessons to digest the usefulness of northern concepts, theories, assumptions and principles and how they may be better utilised within the context of their own countries. For those interested in academia, it will be a starting point to begin building models for human resource management particularly for Sub Saharan Africa.

*'For every effect there is a cause. The prime mover and the work of men is to change it.'* (Aristotle, 384-322 BC)

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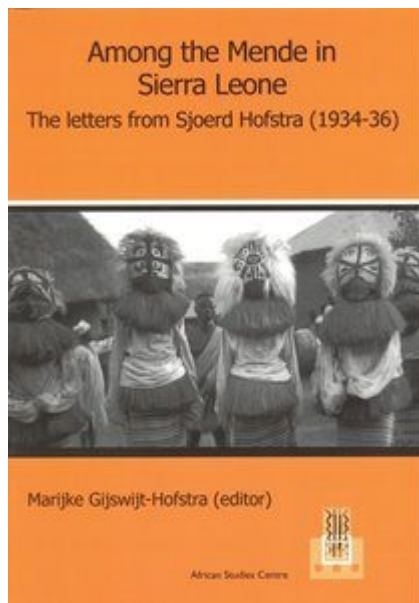
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**Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra (Ed.& transl.) ~ Among The Mende In Sierra Leone: The Letters From Sjoerd Hofstra (1934-36)**



This book offers a unique look behind the scenes of anthropological fieldwork amongst the Mende in Sierra Leone in the mid-1930s. The Dutch anthropologist and sociologist Sjoerd Hofstra (1898-1983), Rockefeller research fellow of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures and one of Bronislaw Malinowski's three 'Mandarins' (as were also Meyer Fortes and S. Frederick Nadel), reports in long, bi-weekly letters to his adoptive mother about his experiences with the Mende. During his first stay in Sierra Leone (January 1934 - March 1935), Hofstra got blackwater fever, a

complication of malaria tropica. His second stay (May - September 1936) came to an untimely end because he again developed symptoms of blackwater fever and was advised to return to Europe. Because of this his fieldwork remained unfinished, and Hofstra never got round to publishing the planned book on the Mende. However, Hofstra published four articles on the Mende in English, photocopies of which are included in this book. Next to these articles Hofstra's letters to his adoptive mother contain valuable first-hand information about his fieldwork. His daughter, cultural and social historian Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, has edited and translated these letters, while also including contextual information.

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