

# 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 Nación*, 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*

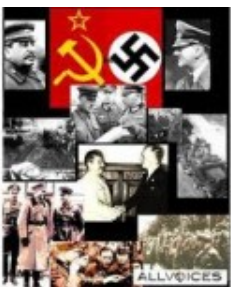
This brief review also presages the major themes of Arendt's post-*Origins* political thought, and their relation to her yet to be articulated theory of totalitarianism.

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).**[ix]** 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 of 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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