

THE LESSER EVIL

Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices

Editors:
HELMUT DUBIEL
and GABRIEL MOTZKIN



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THE LESSER EVIL

Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions

Series Editors: Michael Burleigh, Robert Mallett and Emilio Gentile

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Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices

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Series Editor's Preface

As the generic introduction to this series explains, these books 'will scrutinise all attempts to totally refashion mankind and society, whether these hailed from the Left or the Right, which, unusually, will receive equal consideration'. Unusually, because, although the history of the twentieth century should not be reduced to a competition between the merely gruesome, it is transparently the case that the crimes of Communism, admirable chronicled in the recent *Black Book of Communism* and most recently by the journalist Anne Applebaum in her stunning book *GULAG*, have been neglected in favour of what almost amounts to a pathological and unsavoury addiction to the atrocities of Nazism.

This addiction, represented in my own limited acquaintance by the computer programmer who devours every new book on Hitler, the local butcher who watches every Second World War TV documentary, and Oxford political-science colleagues who spend each interview with prospective students discussing Hitler (as opposed to Hobbes, Locke or Burke), the only subject adolescents can talk about with any fluency, is fuelled by the media and Hollywood as well as by scholarship of quasi-industrial proportions.

The imbalance is obvious to both plain and sophisticated people, many of whom, at least in Europe, are growing weary of having the crimes of Nazism perpetually put before their eyes, especially since this is being done in a crudely instrumental and minatory fashion by people who wish to reduce Europe to little more than a graveyard patrolled by allegedly ever larger numbers of antisemites. The USA, by contrast, remains miraculously immune to this contagion. Paradoxically, as Maurice Cowling has remarked, such heavy insinuations may be contributing to the disturbing recrudescence of the very sentiments they ostensibly aim to check.

The reasons for this systematic imbalance include a residual subscription to 'anti-fascist' mythology on the part of some of the liberal-Left as well as former Stalinists; an inability to identify with the sort of people imprisoned

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or murdered by Marxists, such as Kazakh herdsmen or Ukrainian farmers; the bizarre notion that criticising Communist tyranny somehow detracts from a wider ‘progressive’ agenda and hence aids and abets conservatives, or, horror of horrors, neo- or post-Fascists; as well as, finally, an understandable preoccupation among citizens of post-Communist societies, notably in Russia, with daily survival after a 70-year man-made disaster, and a less excusable nostalgia for the times when the USSR was at least ‘big’ as well as ‘bad’, with ‘badness’ being re-construed as a bit of excessive social ‘discipline’.

There are various recent attempts to compare and contrast Nazism and Stalinism – one of which found no room for comparing them as sinister police states with ramified concentration camp industrial complexes. The present book, whose contributors include several of the major historical thinkers of our time, such as Martin Malia and Tzvetan Todorov, is important because it reflects both on the terms of any comparison and on what those who write in good faith hope to achieve by it, without seeking to shape a spurious consensus. It is an important book that deserves a wide readership.

Michael Burleigh
Series Co-Editor

Introduction

Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel Motzkin

Any reader looking for a consensus on the topic of the comparison between Nazism and Communism will not find it here. The editors had the idea that this volume should include essays by scholars who disagree about the purpose, the methods, and the assumptions behind such a comparison. The disagreement extends even to the analyses and interpretations of the different ways in which these movements continue to have an impact on our culture even after they have ceased to threaten us.

The necessity for analyzing these comparisons first struck one of the editors, Gabriel Motzkin, when he read a review of *Le livre noir du Communisme* (*The Black Book of Communism*) in the *Times Literary Supplement* from 27 March 1998, entitled ‘The Lesser Evil?’ The review was written by Martin Malia, an eminent historian and contributor to this volume who has written works on Russia’s cultural and intellectual relations with the West. Reading that review, the editors felt that it would be problematic if two isolated discourses were to develop side-by-side: one about the reception of Nazism and the other about the reception of Communism. A competition for significance would develop between the experts on Nazism and the experts on Communism. Such an approach could easily distort the historical and ethical evaluation of these movements. Indeed, when experts who study Nazism or Communism make comparisons between different aspects of the two, they often do so without a sufficient acquaintance with the history of the other movement.

Serendipitously, at the same time that Malia’s review appeared, Avishai Margalit, with whom Motzkin had collaborated on several articles, read an essay by Alain de Benoist, ‘Nazism and Communism: Evil Twins?’, published in the summer 1998 issue of *Telos*. The essay outraged him, and he suggested to Motzkin to do an article together on the meaning of this very comparison. While that project never came to fruition, its spirit, which took the form

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of long and intense discussions with Margalit, is adopted in the collection that we now offer to the interested public.

Being at the time the Director of the Franz-Rosenzweig Center for German–Jewish Literature and Cultural History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Motzkin conceived of doing a conference on the subject and shared his idea with Dietmar Müller-Elmau of Schloss Elmau in Bavaria. The conference took place in August 2000.

One of the participants in the Elmau conference was Helmut Dubiel, whom Motzkin had met the previous spring at a conference organized by a group of scholars working on a collective research project on ‘Cultures of Memory’ and sponsored by the German Research Authority and the University of Gießen. Dubiel’s most recent book, *No One is Free from History*, examined the debates in the German Bundestag about dealing with the Nazi past. At the Elmau conference, Dubiel was so taken by the subject that he suggested doing a second conference. As Dubiel then became the Max Weber Professor for European Studies at New York University, it was decided that New York University and the Rosenzweig Center would co-host this second conference in New York City. The conference took place in April 2001. We are indebted to Professor Richard Foley, the Dean of New York University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, for his unwavering support. Most of the immediate organization of the conference fell on the staff of the Center for European Studies at New York University. We express our gratitude to its members and particularly to Ms Alamanda Griffin.

Dietmar Müller-Elmau suggested that this second conference required a preliminary discussion, for which he generously offered financial support. That pre-conference was held in December 2000 at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and was aided by the contribution of Shimshon Zelniker, the Director of the institute.

This volume, therefore, is the outcome of three scholarly discussions: Elmau, August 2000, Jerusalem, December 2000, and New York City, April 2001. Each conference had its own focus. Nonetheless, the meetings shared several themes. The themes deserve to be mentioned at the outset, for they are the bones of contention in the arguments between the different essays in this collection.

The first issue concerns the different academic reception of Nazism and Communism. Martin Malia argues that we know much more about Nazi atrocities than about Communist atrocities and this difference in knowledge has colored our historical interpretation. Lukes implies the opposite: he holds that the atrocities of Communism have been well known for a long time, and that actually there were periods in which greater attention has been paid to Communist atrocities than to Nazi atrocities.

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The second issue can be defined as the issue of rationality. It has three aspects: the rationality of the victims; the rationality of the actual actions undertaken by the perpetrators; and the alleged rationality of the perpetrators' worldview. Dan Diner has held elsewhere, in opposition to Hannah Arendt's thesis, that the *Judenräte* behaved in a 'rational' way. At the conference in Jerusalem, Margalit argued for the rationality of the way the Communists conceived of what they were doing. The issue of the supposed rationality and instrumentality of Nazi actions during the Holocaust is well known. Then there is the question of the allegedly greater rationality of the Communist worldview in comparison with the Nazi worldview. It is commonly held that the Communists were less fantastic in their world plans. Malia's, Meuschel's and Margolin's interpretations might well lead to the questioning of this assumption.

Third, there is another problem intertwined with the multi-dimensional issue of rationality. Malia captured it perhaps best in his original review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, when he intimated that in some quarters degrading the ideals of the Enlightenment would be regarded as worse than denying them. In other words, the Communists' allegedly greater rationality could easily lead them to create an even more imaginary system, one in which lies would be institutionalized so that the apparent rationality of the system would remain unquestioned. In that case, the Nazis' allegedly greater irrationality would actually make it possible for them to be more open about their terrible aims. In relation to the implications of rationality and irrationality for systemic honesty and dishonesty, one question that emerged was whether there was a distinction between lying to others and lying to oneself. Several of the participants in the conference understood the Communists as having lied to themselves, while the Nazis felt no obligation of integrity to others.

Fourth, a larger issue that hovered above all discussions was the relation between memory and history. In this context, 'memory' is shorthand for the way we choose to remember and commemorate the atrocities perpetrated in the name of these two movements. History here refers not so much to what actually happened, but rather to the place of intellectuals and scholars in reconstructing what happened, a role that has academic, ethical and cultural aspects. The essays by Diner, Malia, Motzkin, Aschheim, Lang, Ackermann, Ben-Ghiat and Todorov all address this issue.

Finally, there is the question of the role of the intellectual in preserving and analyzing the past. This problem is well reflected in the intellectuals' biographies and identities. Several essays – Wohlfahrt's and Lukes' most poignantly – raise this question. It should be pointed out that many of the participants in the conferences, among them Dubiel, Diner, Ackermann, Lukes and Margolin, were in their student days sympathizers with the left, and some still are. A consideration of the issue of Communist atrocities

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therefore functions for them in ways that are partially comparable with the Germans' acknowledgements of Nazi atrocities, namely a painful questioning of one's own values and identities. Behind this particular question of one's own allegiances is a larger issue, the question of whether the comparison, as it is addressed in this collection, can be misused by political movements for their own goals. The argument could all too easily be made that such a comparison is really intended to rehabilitate the one or the other movement, and that therefore it is politically implicated with the movement that it excuses. Here is the place to state emphatically that nothing could be further from the intentions of the editors or of any of the contributors. We are all aware of the danger, but we also think that it would be a dereliction of responsibility if we neglected the comparison, for several reasons. First, because it has played such an important role in twentieth-century history: Nazism and Communism have been compared since the inception of both movements. Second, because the comparison will be made by irresponsible people, if not by responsible people. A sense of responsibility implies being sensitive to the fuzzy border between self-critique and apologetic, between critique of one's own actions and letting oneself off the hook. And, third, because the different ways in which comparisons can be and have been used and abused by both right and left have not always been so distinct.

It is our responsibility to understand our culture. In relation to the traumas of the twentieth century, which invite comparison if only because of their traumatic effects, that responsibility has two aspects: our obligation to understand what happened and our obligation to understand how we have dealt with it ever since.

Part I

Approaches

Nazism–Communism: Delineating the Comparison

Martin Malia

When we ask whether it is Communism or Nazism that must be judged the greater evil, what exactly should we compare in order to frame an answer? The usual procedure is to contrast inventories of horror: numbers of victims, means and circumstances of their deaths, types of concentration camps. Yet how do we make the transition from the raw facts of atrocity to a judgment of their moral meaning? Just why, for example, is the industrialized extermination mounted by Hitler more ‘evil’ than the ‘pharaonic technology’ employed by Stalin and Mao Zedong?¹ It would be an error to suppose there can exist a simple or direct answer to such a question. Rather, this greatest of vexed issues handed down from the twentieth century must be approached on three inter-related levels: moral, political and historical.

On the first level, we are concerned with the philosophical matter of ascertaining degrees of evil; and it is this exercise that arouses the greatest passion and has produced the most extensive literature. On the second level, we are enquiring whether the two systems may be legitimately equated as totalitarian polities; and since totalitarianism is clearly a bad thing, this subject also has moral ramifications that make it almost as contentious as the first. Yet, to give convincing answers to either of these questions, the indispensable preliminary is to confront some basic historical problems: Nazism and Communism’s two-decade relationship, their organizational structures, their ideological purposes, and their actual *res gestae*.

It is to delineating a perspective on this third level that the present chapter is basically devoted. The first level will be touched on only by implication: we will be lucky if the volume as a whole can establish standards of evidence compelling enough to yield a consensual moral evaluation. The second level, which is more easily grounded in history, is given greater direct attention and evaluation; and something like a

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concept of generic totalitarianism will emerge by the end. As for the central subject of this chapter, the third level, the emphasis here is not on substantive, still less systematic, historical comparison, but on the parameters of such an investigation. Yet even within this narrowed-down task we encounter a complex mixture of overlapping and asymmetry.

There is, first, an obvious temporal overlapping: Hitler and Stalin were contemporaries; Nazism developed in part in opposition to Communism while Communism's primary defining adversary was always 'Fascism'; and in this interlocking relationship the two went to Armageddon together in the most traumatic moment of the century. Conversely, there is a major temporal asymmetry: Nazism lasted only 12 years and in a single country, spreading outward only by conquest, whereas Soviet Communism lasted 74 years, and eventually cloned itself over a third of the planet. Indeed, Communism is still with us, though in anemic form, in East Asia and just offshore from Miami.

Then, too, there are asymmetries of a conceptual sort. Is Nazism a unique case or part of a generic 'Fascism', beginning with Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922 and embracing the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War, the Romanian Iron Guard, and Tojo's generals in Japan? After all, Hitler and Mussolini intervened together to aid Franco, they formed a Rome-Berlin Axis and eventually, with Japan, an Anti-Comintern Pact. Until well after the war, the term 'Axis' was colloquial shorthand for everyone on the 'Fascist' side (only Finland escaped obloquy for its involvement).

With the passage of time, however, this picture was significantly blurred. Throughout the century the Communists alone adhered consistently to the category of generic Fascism (which they had indeed invented in the 1920s). Thus, from the mid-1930s onward the slogan 'anti-Fascism' beckoned liberals to their side in one or another 'popular front', and even today it remains a mobilizing watchword. Non-Communist historians, for their part, wavered on this issue, though most would distinguish 'national authoritarian' regimes, such as Franco's Spain or Salazar's Portugal, with their commitment to social conservatism, a purely defensive foreign policy and traditional religion, from the 'neo-pagan' and imperialistic 'mobilization regimes' of Germany and Italy.² Finally, the exceptional nature of the Nazi death camps and the growing postwar awareness of the Holocaust, in conjunction with the thesis of its world-historical uniqueness, have increasingly argued for Nazism's singularity among European 'Fascisms'.

By contrast, the existence of a generic Communism can scarcely be questioned. It exists everywhere a Leninist party with the mission of 'building socialism' is in power, said socialism requiring the suppression of private property and the market in favor of institutional dictatorship and a command economy. Even so, this formula has in practice yielded significantly different results from one case and period to another. Thus,

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within the Soviet matrix there were marked fluctuations in coercive power from Lenin's War Communism of 1918–21, to the semi-market New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921–29, to Stalin's 'revolution from above' of the early 1930s and his Great Terror of the decade's end and so on to the perilous wartime and imperial postwar periods (Nazism, on the other hand, subdivides chiefly into prewar and wartime periods, and public attention has focused overwhelmingly on the latter). Finally, in the Soviet case, the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras are distinguished from Stalinism by diminished revolutionary vigor and a much-reduced level of terror.

Outside the Russian matrix, variations in the Leninist formula are even more notable. The Soviets' postwar 'outer empire' in eastern Europe was significantly different from the 'inner empire' of the Union itself. There were no real revolutions in eastern Europe (outside of Yugoslavia, which soon left the Soviet orbit), but instead a diversified process of conquest and absorption. Postwar Poland, for example, where the peasantry was never collectivized, is hardly comparable with Russia under Stalin, or even with Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu (which was no longer really in the 'outer empire'). And although the political police were active everywhere, there was simply not space enough for real Gulags.

When we move from the Soviet zone in Europe to the Communisms of East Asia, we find greater differences still. Not only were all these regimes institutionally independent of Moscow, but each was different from the other. Kim Il Sung's socialism meant a hermetically closed family dictatorship as surreal as that of Ceaușescu; yet the 'Great Leader' also retained the Soviet alliance as a shield against China. Mao Zedong, on the other hand, was Moscow's greatest enemy on the left; so to prove his superiority over Khrushchev and his 'capitalist roaders', he outdid even Stalin's terror in seeking socialism through the Great Leap Forward of 1959–61 and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. Ho Chi Minh, by contrast, though as authentically Leninist as his predecessors to the north, at least channeled his party's energy into a war his population supported. Pol Pot, finally, produced the demented *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole Communist enterprise, as he attempted to out-radical not just Moscow, but Beijing and Hanoi as well. All these Communisms, moreover, varied in the intensity of their fury from one period to another, most notably as Maoism gave way to Deng Xiaoping's 'market Leninism'.

Still another variation on the generic Communist formula is introduced by the overlap of Leninism with nationalism, not only in the Soviet zone and East Asia but also in Cuba. It has often been noted that 'proletarian internationalism' has been a very weak competitor to modern nationalism; and, indeed, ever since European socialist parties in 1914 voted for war credits in their respective parliaments, in almost any crisis workers have put patriotism first. Consequently, it has been claimed that Stalinism was

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basically a new species of messianic Russian nationalism, that Maoism was an exacerbated Chinese reply to Soviet 'hegemonic' pretensions, that Ho Chi Minh was a kind of Vietnamese George Washington, and that the sui-genocidal rampage of Pol Pot was a product of traditional Cambodian hatred of Vietnam. Obviously, also, Castro's revolution was a reaction to Yankee imperialism. Nationalism has, of course, played a role in all these cases. The real question, however, is whether that role is sufficient to demote generic Communism to secondary rank.

The answer depends on what we consider to be Communism's 'social base'. If we take the rhetoric of the 'international workers' movement' literally, then worker addiction to nationalism argues against generic Communism's importance.³ In fact, however, that 'movement' has always been a movement of parties, not of proletariats. These parties, moreover, were founded by intellectuals and largely run by them, at least in their heroic phase, not by their alleged worker base; only later were these parties run by such ex-worker-apparatchiki as Khrushchev or Brezhnev. By then, of course, the full administrative autonomy of the East Asian parties (and the relative autonomy of the East European ones) had fragmented Stalin's genuinely international movement into sovereign entities. Even so, each entity preserved its Leninist structure and goals.

Resolution of the question of nationalism prevailing over Communism also depends on historical period: in the case of Lenin's, and indeed Stalin's, Russia, the answer is definitely no; in the case of Jiang Zemin's China it may still turn out to be yes. Yet we will not know for sure until we see how the last Leninist regimes disappear. An even deeper answer to this question, however, is that Leninist parties, whether united or at odds, have been able to master their populations' nationalism only so long as millenarian zeal lasted; but when zeal waned, nationalism returned to the fore. Indeed, the withering away of zeal is what explains the fate of both the former Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation. For in each case it was the prior death of the party that produced the collapse of the unitary state, with former apparatchiki, such as Slobodan Milosevic or Nursultan Nazarbayev, taking up the nationalist cause to retain power.

Given this range of asymmetries between Nazism (and/or 'Fascism') and Communism, as well as the differences among the Leninist cases, what then should we compare in assessing their political kinship or the depth of their criminality? Psychologically satisfying though it may be for some to find sharp distinctions between the two systems and for others to find close kinship, it should be obvious that the vagaries of history will force us to settle for a mixture of similarities and differences.⁴

The basic similarity is that both movements, whatever they claimed to be themselves, had the same enemy: liberal democracy. Both emerged in the

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wake of World War I as explicit negations of Europe's long-term movement toward constitutional government founded on universal suffrage; and so both replaced rule-of-law parliamentarianism with a one-party regime under a supreme leader, exercising dictatorial power and employing police terror. Both regimes, furthermore, instituted command economies, whether through outright nationalization as in Russia or by administrative pressure as in Germany. Finally, both were driven by millenarian ideologies: in the case of the Nazis, the quest for the world hegemony of an Aryan *Volksgemeinschaft* ('community of people'); in the case of the Communists, the triumph of world socialist revolution.

These political and ideological characteristics, of course, amount to what is known as the 'totalitarian model', as this was defined in the wake of World War II (which was also the beginning of the Cold War) by such figures as Hannah Arendt and the political scientists Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski.⁵ In fact, however, this perception of similarity antedates the war. In the 1930s it was commonplace to refer to Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin collectively as 'the dictatorships'. Indeed, this perception had been given scholarly conceptualization as early as in 1937 by Elie Halévy in his *The Era of Tyrannies*, which explained the emergence of the dictatorships by a conjunction of the socialist ideal with the mass mobilization of modern war.⁶

When modern war actually came a second time it confirmed the 1930s' prior judgment, first of all in the collusion between the two chief dictators in the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact of 1939. Even more important, however, was the revelation of the Nazi death camps, which made it starkly clear that modern 'dictatorship' was an unprecedented phenomenon in world politics. At the same time, Communism's victory did nothing to mitigate its own, equally unprecedented terrorist power. In the face of these realities the classical terms 'tyranny' and 'despotism' were totally inadequate, as was the limp modern label 'authoritarianism'; so 'totalitarianism' carried the definitional day. This choice was confirmed as militant Communism spread during the next five years over a third of the planet to reach its historical apogee. Thus, as World War II gave way almost immediately to the Cold War, Stalin came to fill the whole totalitarian space, becoming in the eyes of the liberal world Hitler's moral heir.⁷

This unitary perception of totalitarianism, however, progressively lost ground after Stalin's death in 1953. As Khrushchev attempted limited reform and as open dissidence appeared under Brezhnev, the Soviet party-state, though it clearly remained tyrannical, appeared distinctly less total and monolithic. Concurrently, as scholarship accumulated about the Third Reich, the Nazi dictatorship came to seem less Behemoth-like and more 'polycratic' than had earlier been supposed. Finally, as public awareness of the Holocaust grew after the 1960s, the Nazi case came to be increasingly