Richard J. Golsan

Introduction to the English-Language Edition

The Politics of History and Memory in France in the 1990s

Henry Rousso’s *Stalinism and Nazism: History and Memory Compared* situates itself at the center of a number of important debates that have not only shaped the field of “contemporary history” in France in the last decade but also generated considerable and persistent controversy in the public forum as well.

As its title suggests, this book engages in the first instance with the heated and often ideologically loaded debate surrounding the comparison of Communism and fascism, and National Socialism in particular. Because the comparison of these ideologies in their various expressions inevitably involves discussion of the applicability and viability of the concept of totalitarianism, *Stalinism and Nazism* addresses this subject as well.

As its title also suggests, the collection explores the difficult relationship between history and memory, primarily the history and memory of the traumas associated with the double experience of Nazi and Soviet occupation in several Eastern European countries. While France was of course never occupied by the Soviet Union, the experience of Nazi occupation during World War II, coupled with Vichy complicity in the Holocaust, has left scars on the French national psyche and pitted “history” and “memory” against each other on a number of levels and in several important contexts. Because the competing and often conflicting imperatives of history and memory regarding Vichy have a bearing on the framing of the debates and issues dealt with in this volume, it is important to consider them briefly here.

In his now-classic study *The Vichy Syndrome* (1987), Henry Rousso examines in compelling detail how the memory of the Vichy period has evolved over time since the liberation of France in 1944. 1 Subject to cultural and generational shifts as well as political manipulations, the memory of the Pétain regime and the German Occupation—of les années noires (the “Dark Years”)—has, in Rousso’s view, gone through four distinct phases, the last of which has particular relevance here. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the memory of Vichy has been nothing less than a national “obsession,” to use Rousso’s term, provoking political and judicial scandals and inspiring controversial films and novels. The primary reason for Vichy’s remarkable notoriety is that, increasingly, the memory of the period has focused on the regime’s involvement with the Nazis’ “Final Solution” and on Vichy’s own homegrown anti-Semitic
laws and policies. For many in France, the memory of these persecutions has required not only a recognition of the nation’s racist abuses in the past, along with a variety of forms of commemoration of the victims, but also a belated effort to rectify past injustices by prosecuting perpetrators a half century after the crimes themselves were committed. The prosecutions in question are, of course, the trials for crimes against humanity of the Nazi Klaus Barbie in 1987 and of the Frenchmen Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon in 1994 and 1997–98, respectively. By all accounts these trials constituted the most visible and controversial efforts on the part of the French to come to terms with the abuses of their Vichy past and, in the process, to fulfill a devoir de mémoire (duty to memory) toward the victims.

In what way or ways did the memory of Vichy conflict with its history? And in what way or ways did the “duty to memory” interfere with the imperatives and obligations of the historian? In general terms, according to Rousso and others, the predominantly “judeocentric” nature of the memory of Vichy, at least in the public mind, risked distorting a balanced and objectively historical understanding of the complex realities of the Dark Years as well as the broader aims, ambitions, and ideology of the Pétain regime itself. Moreover, a near exclusive emphasis on Vichy’s persecution of the Jews ran the risk not only of effacing the crucial role played by the Nazis but also of giving the French an exaggerated sense of the criminality of their own past, a state of mind hardly conducive to national pride and a sense of optimism about the future. For historians of the Vichy past, the situation was particularly vexed. Solicited by the media to discuss Vichy and its memory in a wide variety of contexts and situations, these scholars were often expected to offer their expertise in a climate that was geared as much to scandalizing the past as it was to establishing the truth. Moreover, on occasion they were called upon to make judgments concerning events and individuals, an activity in keeping, perhaps, with fulfilling a “duty to memory” but highly problematic for the historian in exercising his or her profession in accordance with its own standards and practices.

For Rousso, the “instrumentalization” of history—and of historians—in this fashion reached its zenith in the trials for crimes against humanity of Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon. Because of the nature—and, depending on one’s perspective, the perversion—of French statutes concerning such crimes, at his 1994 trial Touvier could only be found guilty if it could be “proven” that in committing his crimes during the Occupation, he had acted essentially as a German, rather than a French, agent. “This was unquestionably a distortion of history, but because the “duty to the memory” of his victims—and public expectations—required Touvier’s conviction, the distortion had to be tolerated. So when he was found guilty of crimes against humanity for the 1944 murder of seven Jewish hostages, justice may ultimately have been served and the law satisfied, but only at the cost of violence done to the historical record.”

If the conflicting imperatives of history and memory were apparent in the Touvier verdict, they also made their presence felt in other contexts in both the Touvier and Papon trials, especially when distinguished historians of the Vichy period were called upon to act as witnesses for the prosecution. First, these scholars were asked to make assessments and judgments less in the name of establishing an impartial truth—certainly the historian’s primary function—than in providing evidence in order to secure a conviction that was itself mandated by the “duty to memory.” Moreover, offering their assessments on the stand in the context of a criminal trial and not in a scholarly forum, the historians discovered that their knowledge and expertise could be challenged and dismissed not on scholarly grounds but as merely the “opinion” of one witness among others.

It is important to stress again that the conflicting demands of history and memory as described here, as well as the effect of that conflict on the role of the historian and the writing of history in contemporary French society, are not limited in their import to the Vichy past. Rather, the eruption of these tensions and conflicts—primarily in relation to Vichy, to be sure—has conditioned other debates in a variety of ways and contexts, including the ongoing debate over the comparison of Communism and Nazism.

As Rousso notes in his introduction to the present volume, the debate over the comparison of Communism and Nazism reemerged in France in the 1990s primarily in relation to the publication of two massive works dealing, in the main, with the history and memory of Communism. The first of these works was François Furet’s Le Passé d’une illusion: Essai sur l’idée communiste au XXe siècle, published in 1995 (translated and published in the United States as The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century). Furet’s book examines not only aspects of the history of Communism and the regimes it inspired but also the manner in which its myths mobilized generations of intellectuals and others in the service of the Communist idea. Of these myths, among the most inspirational, certainly in France, was the notion that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was a direct continuation of the French Revolution, which was itself understood to be the great liberating experience of modernity. This misperception, according to Furet, accounts for a good deal of the misguided and even blind support
and devotion Communism enjoyed in many quarters in France even up to after the Soviet collapse of 1989.

In a chapter entitled simply "Communism and Fascism," Furet tackles the thorny issue of the comparison of the ideologies in question and their representative regimes head on while offering his own assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the totalitarian model. One of Furet's more debated claims, as Rousso points out below, is that Bolshevism, Nazism, and Italian Fascism all shared a common "matrix," or source, in the brutality of World War I. The lessons of trench warfare for all three ideologies and movements were translated into the realm of politics and in large part accounted for the respective movements' successes. These lessons were, according to Furet, a "familiarity with violence, the simplicity of extreme passions, the submission of the individual to the collectivity, and, finally, the bitterness of futile or betrayed sacrifices." Parliamentary democracy, for which Bolshevism, Nazism, and Fascism all shared a visceral hatred, was simply no match for these war-hardened—and incipiently violent—movements.

*The Passing of an Illusion* is, in essence, a wide-ranging condemnation of Communism. Moreover, Furet's focus on Communism's vacuity (the "illusion" of the title) and the delusions it fostered, coupled with his own willingness to compare it directly in its origins, methods, and common features to the ultimate evil, Nazism, contributed significantly to the controversy provoked by its publication. As Rousso states in his introduction, the comparison of Communism and Nazism has generally been underdeveloped in France because it has, of course, never found favor with the Parti communiste français (French Communist Party) and the generations of intellectuals it influenced. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening of the former Soviet archives, and the declining presence and cachet of French Communism and its political organization, the time was ripe to reexamine, or, more accurately, to examine closely for the first time, the history and memory of the other great destructive ideology of twentieth-century Europe, Communism, and compare it to Nazism.

If *The Passing of an Illusion* established the precedent of taking a hard look at Communism and the destructive illusions it fostered while comparing it directly with Nazism—in short, of challenging the sanctity of its memory in a comprehensive fashion—the task of *scandalizing* the Communist past and the comparison with Nazism fell to another book, *Le Livre noir du communisme*, published two years later (translated and published in the United States as *The Black Book of Communism*). Representing the combined efforts of six leading historians, the *Black Book* set for itself the hugely ambitious and painful task of writing the history of the crimes of Communist regimes worldwide, from the abuses of the Soviet state under Lenin and Stalin, to those of China under Mao, to the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and the various Marxist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Central and South America. That the crimes of these regimes were not to be soft-pedaled in *The Black Book* was evident in the starkness of the book's subtitle: *Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Moreover, the comparison of Communism's crimes with those of Nazism was evident in the choice of titles. *The Black Book of Communism* echoes the title of Ilya Ehrenbourg's and Vassily Grossman's massive record of the crimes of Nazis against the Jews behind the lines on the eastern front during World War II, *The Black Book of Nazism*.

Despite Communism's diminished presence and influence in 1990s France, the prestige it still enjoyed in some quarters—or the nostalgia it inspired—coupled with its historical role in the antifascist struggles of the 1930s and especially in the resistance to Nazi occupation, meant that a book devoted exclusively to Communism's innumerable crimes was bound to stir controversy. The Parisian daily *Libération* described *The Black Book of Communism* as a "catastrophe in the history of the human race." While many on the Left attempted to do damage control, the right rejoiced. Conservative deputies in the National Assembly, brandishing what appeared to be copies of the book, gleefully called upon then Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin to justify the inclusion of a party still unrepentant over its "criminal past" in his governing coalition. Those on the extreme right, long on the defensive, took the opportunity to turn the tables on their enemies and in the process make Nazism appear to be, in effect, the lesser of two evils. Referring—with a striking lack of precision—to Communism's massive body count worldwide and comparing it to the number of Nazi victims, the former New Right intellectual Alain de Benoist offered an assessment of the two ideologies on the basis of their respective murderousness. His conclusion was that Communism was worse: "Communism killed much more than Nazism, ... and for a longer time, ... and it began to do so before Nazism." De Benoist's argument in fact draws on one of the major points of Stéphane Courtois's highly polemical introduction to *The Black Book of Communism*, which, in terms of the controversy it provoked, overshadowed the rest of the chapters combined. Unlike the individual case studies that explore the crimes of particular Communist regimes but eschew comparisons with Nazism and its crimes, Courtois makes that comparison the central focus.
of his introduction. Moreover, he compares Communist and Nazi crimes along quantitative, legal, and moral lines that many found both troubling and ideologically motivated.

Laying the groundwork for the kind of numerical comparison later used by de Benoist, Courtois tallies up Communism's body count, "based on unofficial estimates," and concludes that Communist regimes worldwide were responsible for some one hundred million deaths. By comparison, Nazism was less prolific. Courtois then proceeds to a "legal" comparison with Nazism in accusing Communism on numerous counts for crimes against peace, war crimes, and, most significantly, crimes against humanity. Finally, in the context of his legalistic "indictment," Courtois draws a moral equivalency between the Communist crimes and those of Nazism in asserting that "the genocide of a 'class' may well be tantamount to a genocide of 'race,'" and that "the deliberate starvation of a child of a Ukrainian kulak as a result of the famine caused by Stalin's regime is equal to the starvation of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto as a result of the famine caused by the Nazi regime."10

Courtois's enormous body count of Communist victims certainly sparked the ire of some of his detractors—including Nicholas Werth, a contributor to the Black Book of Communism, who broke publicly with him over several aspects of the introduction, including the fact that Courtois used the figure of twenty million dead at the hands of the Soviets, whereas Werth's own estimate, given in his chapter of that volume, was fifteen million. Moreover, the implicit—and unfavorable—comparison with Nazism on this score was not lost on Werth, who noted in an interview in L'Histoire that any tally sheet of Nazi's crimes should include the fifty million dead of World War II, for whom Nazi Germany should be held accountable.11

While Courtois's gridy statistics provoked strong reactions from others in addition to Werth, it was undoubtedly the moral and legal dimensions of the comparison of the criminality of the regimes and ideologies in question that provoked the most heated controversy. To begin with the moral dimension, Courtois's effort to establish a moral equivalency between the death by starvation of a kulak child at the hands of the Bolsheviks and of a Jewish child at the hands of the Nazis was attacked as ludicrous, for as Rousso states in his introduction, "on the level of morality, there is absolutely no reason to hierarchically rank the victims of Nazism, Stalinism, or any other system practicing terror." Moreover, he continues, one should not conclude from such comparisons that "on the level of analysis, all these systems are [therefore] equal. If the sufferings of all the innocent victims of political violence are deserving of equal respect in the name of memory, this certainly does not mean that there is an equivalency of the crimes of the executioners." Nor, for many, of the regimes themselves. To the degree that, in making the comparison, Courtois appeared to suggest: the motives and aims of the two regimes were equally murderous and ultimately indistinguishably evil, Werth and others objected on this score as well. Werth and Jean-Louis Margolin, another disaffected contributor to The Black Book of Communism, insisted in Le Monde that it was crucial to distinguish between the Communist dream of the liberation of the majority of humankind and Nazism's racist ideology, which sought, conversely, to "force most human beings into the shadows." Obviously for Werth and Margolin, Communism was less morally reprehensible because it embodied a noble ideal that tragically was not realized in practice.

To this line of reasoning, Courtois responded pointedly in an essay appearing in Le Monde on December 20, 1997: "One has the right to ask in what way the act of killing in the name of 'tomorrows that sing' is more excusable than murder tied to a racist doctrine. And in what way delusions and hypocrisy constitute mitigating circumstances for mass crimes."

Others in fact shared Courtois's perspective in this instance, although they approached the matter differently. In his column in Le Nouvel observateur, Jacques Julliard argued, in effect, that if one insists on the "goodness" of Communism, all of the murders carried out in its name are reduced to the status of "accidents."12 For Alain Besançon the implicit perversity of this perspective—and of Communism itself—was built into its praxis. Comparing Communism to Nazism in moral terms, he concludes: "Communism is more perverse than Nazism because it does not demand of the individual that he consciously embrace the immorality of the criminal and that he exploit the spirit of justice and goodness present in the world in order to spread evil. Each experience of Communism begins in innocence."13

While Courtois's dismissal of a moral distinction between Communism and Nazism in terms of their respective ideals and motivations attracted support from other well-known and respected historians and commentators, his efforts to establish the legal equivalency of the crimes of the two political systems attracted no such support. This is not surprising, given that Courtois appears to call—even if in principle only—for nothing less than a Nuremberg tribunal of sorts for the crimes of Communism. Indeed, he summarizes Nuremberg statutes concerning crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity and then makes what Rousso describes here as a "muddled-headed attempt" to apply these definitions to numerous crimes committed by Communist regimes worldwide. In each instance he provides no docu-
mentary evidence to support his charges and follows no "procedures," legal or otherwise. In short, no "case" is built. Finally, rather than charge individuals, as in done in court, Courtois accuses and condemns entire regimes.

As if these aspects of his approach were not troubling enough, Courtois makes another move in his legal comparison of the crimes of Nazism and Communism that was bound to produce fallout in France, especially in the fall of 1997. After having ascertained the applicability of the Nuremberg statutes to the crimes of Communism, Courtois changes course somewhat in reminding the reader that these statutes, of course, were only intended to be applied to crimes committed "during World War II [sic]." In "updating" his indictment, so to speak, Courtois turns to recent French law on the subject and proceeds to a second demonstration of the culpability of Communist regimes for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.

Given the moment the *Black Book of Communism* appeared and the publicity it garnered, Courtois's evocation of French laws governing genocide and especially crimes against humanity could not have been more provocative. Several weeks earlier, on October 8, the trial for crimes against humanity of former Vichy civil servant Maurice Papon had opened in Bordeaux to enormous national and international media coverage. As already noted, Papon was the third such trial, and it would prove to be the longest and most contentious.

The Papon trial was intended to be, according to the media at least, the decisive moment of France's legal and symbolic reckoning with its Vichy past as well as a major step in the fulfillment of the nation's duty to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. But from the outset the proceedings were fraught with difficulties. Like the earlier Touvier trial, this one pitted history against memory in a variety of troubling contexts. The "duty to memory" was tangibly present in the form of large numbers of "memory militants" who kept vigils and chanted outside the court throughout the six-month-long trial. Inside, victims and relatives of victims, suffering from failing memories, provided faulty accounts of what had actually occurred, but given the tragedies they or their loved ones had experienced, lawyers and judges were frequently loathe to contradict them.

The conflict between history and memory was, moreover, not the only pitfall along the path to bringing Papon to justice. The trial also fully exposed the legal fragility of the notion of crimes against humanity and the moral—and other—dilemmas raised by efforts to apply them to individuals. First, was it fair to apply laws retroactively? Statutes governing crimes against humanity in France were not put on the books until 1964, and yet Papon was being tried for actions taken more than twenty years earlier. Was it just to try an individual—and a very old one at that—for crimes he had supposedly committed a half century earlier? How could solid proof of his guilt be established, with so much time elapsed? Finally, given the history of their numerous modifications by various French courts in order to suit the circumstances of the moment (and the demands of competing constituencies), were crimes against humanity so lacking in precision and so discredited by repeated revisions that they had lost all cogency and meaning? For some, the fact that Papon could be tried for crimes against humanity for deporting Jews at the behest of the Nazis but not for condoning (ordering, according to some accounts) the brutal beatings and murders of Algerian protesters by Parisian police when he was prefect of police under de Gaulle in October 1961 underscored the degree to which the laws themselves were arbitrary and tailored less to serve justice than political imperatives of the time.

For many, the verdict—guilty, but not of complicity in the deaths of the deportees—and the sentence—only ten years' imprisonment for the most heinous of crimes—summed up not only the inadequacies of French laws dealing with crimes against humanity but also a whole host of other dilemmas attendant upon coming to terms with the crimes of the past. According to Eric Conan, the "verdict of compromise" in the Papon case "illustrated once again the impossibility of reconciling the law, memory . . . and History."

In a context such as this, Courtois's introduction to the *Black Book of Communism* could only further muddy the waters and, in its very conception and execution, make a mockery of both the lengthy and painstaking efforts to bring one individual to justice and the legal hair-splitting required to convict him. Moreover, the absolute enormity of Communism's crimes against humanity and acts of genocide—as determined by Courtois—completely dwarfed Papon's (perhaps even Vichy's) offenses to the point of almost appearing irrelevant. The enumeration of Communism's crimes against humanity and genocides seemed to imply, finally, that Papon had only been the tip of one iceberg and that French justice, to be thorough and fair, had a whole other criminal past to confront. Given these implications, it is not surprising that Papon's lawyer, Jean-Marc Varaut, attempted to introduce the *Black Book* as evidence. His request was denied.

In retrospect, Courtois's "legal" gambit may well appear crude and deliberately sensationalistic, but there is no doubt that, from his perspective at least, it was intellectually linked not only to his own motives for working on the publication project but also to those of his fellow contributors as well. As Courtois explained in the *Le Monde* essay of December 20, 1997, the
principal aim of the Black Book of Communism was nothing less than to “tear down the ‘mental Berlin Wall’” that supposedly prevented the memory of Communism’s many crimes from coming to light. The “criminal dimension of Communism” could no longer be “passed over in silence,” and the task was therefore to expose the crimes and label them for what they were.

In his introduction Rousseau strenuously objects to the notion that the crimes of Communism have been ignored in contemporary France, that they have been cloaked in amnesia, whereas a state of hyperamnesia, or excessive memory, prevails where the crimes of Nazism are concerned (as Courtois claims). Rousseau stresses the success of both The Passing of an Illusion and The Black Book of Communism, itself a bestseller in France with sales reaching almost two hundred thousand copies a year after its publication, confirms that the crimes of Communism are being remembered only too well.17

But perhaps surprisingly—in this context at least—Rousseau does not express concern for the role Courtois assigns the historian in his essay in Le Monde. It could be argued that tearing down “the mental Berlin Wall” and exposing Communism’s crimes for what they are falls more clearly under the purview of the “memory militant”—and eventually the prosecutor and judge—than of the historian, and indeed Courtois does not shy away from embracing any—and all—of these roles. In fact in the December 20 article he states that one of the principal aims of the contributors to The Black Book of Communism was to pay “legitimate homage to the victims” of Communism, a view that had earlier been articulated in the introduction itself. There, Courtois asserts that the book had been undertaken as both a “work of history” and a “memorial.” The latter function was necessary, he writes, because “There is a moral obligation to honor the innocent and anonymous victims of a juggernaut that has systematically sought to erase even their memory.” And although he rejects for the historian the role of the figure “entrusted with the vengeance of the people in the face of tyranny” (which he nevertheless invokes), Courtois does argue that the kind of historical knowledge the historian of Communism works with cannot be “seen in isolation from certain fundamental principles, such as respect for the rules of a representative democracy and, above all, respect for life and human dignity.” It is in relation to these principles, Courtois concludes, that the historian must “‘judge’ the actors on the stage of history.”18

As the preceding remarks suggest, the heated reception of The Black Book of Communism in the fall of 1997 certainly succeeded in sensationalizing the history and especially the memory of Communism. Moreover, it further complicated the already controversial role and function of the contemporary historian in France. While the revered specialists of Vichy reluctantly assumed the roles of commentator and witness for the prosecution, the historians of Communism, or at least those associated with the Black Book project, willingly assumed the role of memorialist and, in Courtois’s case, that of moralist and judge as well.

But at least initially, the Black Book of Communism controversy did not greatly facilitate what many, including Courtois, hoped it would: a systematic, objective, and thorough comparison of Communism and Nazism. To be sure, the debate surrounding the book’s reception did produce crude comparisons of the enormous number of victims of both systems. It also produced sharp exchanges over the supposed difference in “ideals” of the two ideologies. But in the first instance, as Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin point out, comparing through “atrocities tells” is a hackneyed and politically motivated ploy previously used by “German nationalists and apologists for Nazism” as well as “vehemently anti-Communist Russian nationalists.”19 It does not produce—and is not often intended to produce—meaningful and impartial results. As for differentiating between ideals, while drawing such distinctions is obviously plausible to some, it can also be politically motivated and, equally importantly, dismissed as meaningless in terms of its influence in the real world. To paraphrase Alain de Benoist, what is the difference, after all, between doing evil in the name of good and doing evil in the name of evil? Besides, as Claude Lefort observes in La Compilication, “was it not the totalitarian model and the opportunities it offered for the creation of a Party-State and a new elite that exerted a formidable attraction on all continents, more so than the image of a society delivered from the exploitation of classes and in which all the citizens would enjoy the same rights?”20

If comparing numbers of victims and differences in ideals is ultimately politically suspect or lacking in validity—and a dangerous exercise for responsible historians as well—what forms of comparison between Communism and Nazism can be considered legitimate and impartial? And what is to be gained from the comparison? The debate itself, of course, has a very long history dating back to the interwar years and has most often been conducted in a highly politicized context. Moreover, in general terms the comparison has served “as a device to attack Communism rather than Nazism,” even as a means of exculpating the latter in condemning the former.21 During the “Historians’ Debate” in West Germany in the 1980s, for example, Ernst Nolte’s infamous claim that the Holocaust was undertaken in imitation of—and as a preemptive strike against—Soviet terror and the Gulag was clearly
intended at the very least to reduce Nazi culpability for the Holocaust and at most to suggest that the crime itself could be construed as a legitimate act of German self-defense. To a certain degree that debate has been renewed in France in the 1990s in, among other venues, an exchange of letters between Furet and Nolte, later published under the title Fascism and Communism. It has also surfaced in Courtois’s recent defense of Nolte’s position in his preface to the translation of Nolte’s La Guerre civile européenne.

But if the comparison of Communism and Nazism lends itself to highly troubling and indeed dangerous claims such as Nolte’s, that does not compromise the legitimacy—even the necessity—of the comparison in historical terms. As Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin assert, “in some senses, all historical inquiry is comparative,” and “refusing to compare leaves us blind to the past—and to the past’s implications for the present and future.” Moreover, comparing does not only mean “establishing similarities” but also “uncovering differences.” The combination of the two activities makes it possible to discern uniqueness. As Kershaw affirms, “Only through comparison can uniqueness be confirmed.”

This being the case, what should be the parameters, including the limitations, of historical comparison in this instance? More importantly for situating the present volume, what aspects of the comparison eventually assumed center stage in France during the 1990s?

One important issue that did emerge in the context of the Black Book of Communism controversy arose as a result of Courtois’s comparison of the numbers of victims of Nazism and Communism. His tally sheet implies that it is legitimate to compare Nazism’s crimes to those of all Communists worldwide and that, among other things, no geographical, cultural, or chronological restrictions need be imposed on the comparison. Many, of course, found this approach lacking in historical precision, and it was in part to avoid this pitfall that the present volume limits itself to a comparison of Nazism and Stalinism. But for Courtois, the broader and indeed global comparison was justified by the common, determining lineage of all Communist regimes: “Every Communist country or Party has its own specific history, and its own particular regional and local variations, but a linkage can always be traced to the pattern elaborated in Moscow in 1917. This linkage forms a sort of genetic code of Communism.”

To the degree that Courtois’s “genetic code of Communism” appeared to downplay and essentially marginalize historical, cultural, and geographical specificities in order to emphasize structural commonalities and indeed identities, it coincides nicely with the traditional “totalitarian model” approach for analyzing and comparing Communism and Nazism as well as Fascism. In fact, that model has enjoyed a renewed currency in the French debates of the 1990s; Rousso devotes several pages to an astute analysis of its history, virtues, and limitations in his introduction. As he observes, the concept has particular relevance in the Eastern European countries (discussed in part 2) because they experienced both Nazi and Communist tyranny directly.

The totalitarian model also remains useful, despite its limitations, in comparing Soviet Communism and Nazism, if for no other reason than that it allows for a more systematic exposure of the differences between the two systems. In their comparisons of Nazism and Stalinism in part 1, Philippe Burrin and Nicholas Werth rely on variations of the traditional categories of analysis and the defining features of the totalitarian state—the leader, terror, propaganda, and ideology—in comparing the nature of the dictatorship and of the dictator, political violence, and the “social response” of the people to the ideological domination imposed on them.

Generally speaking, Rousso and the authors of the case studies in Stalinism and Nazism deal with the totalitarian model to the degree that it can be usefully applied in the particular countries and regimes. Redefining it in theoretical terms is not their aim. But others in the context of the recent debates have sought to redefine or fine tune its constituent elements or even reassess its most salient features. The results of these efforts have not necessarily been groundbreaking, but they certainly testify to a widespread interest in the subject in France in the last decade of the twentieth century.

In The Passing of an Illusion and elsewhere, François Furet concerns himself primarily with fine tuning the constituent elements that define a totalitarian state. These are: 1) the absolute rule of the party-state; 2) the cult of the leader; 3) the absence of law; 4) terror; 5) the persecution of churches; and 6) the existence of camps. In an essay entitled “The Totalitarian Experience” published in L’Homme dépeauté (1990), Tzvetan Todorov (who grew up in Communist Bulgaria) is also concerned with the building blocks of totalitarianism and argues that three main elements characterize such a regime: 1) it claims to embody an ideology; 2) it uses terror to control the conduct of the population; and 3) the general rule of existence is the absolute defense of one’s personal interest and the unlimited reign of the will to power.

Obviously, Furet’s and Todorov’s definitions overlap most directly on the issue of terror, and although Todorov does not list “camps” as a distinct element, he describes them elsewhere in L’Homme dépeauté as a crucial component of state terror. But his definition is less concerned than Furet’s with issues such as the persecution of churches while stressing, perhaps more astutely,
the necessity of a common enemy of the people (for examples, Jews, bourgeois) as a scapegoat (in a Girardian sense) to provide a source of social and ideological cohesion. Todorov also stresses that ideology itself is less central to “the totalitarian experience” than is commonly assumed. (In fact Kershaw notes that recent studies of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia emphasize a more limited hold of ideology on the peoples in question, a point echoed by Burrin and Werth here.)

Despite these differences, Furet and Todorov would probably agree with the basic definition of totalitarianism articulated by Jacques Julliard at precisely the moment the scandal over the Black Book of Communism broke: “Totalitarianism is the previously unheard-of and monstrous alliance of terror and mass crime linked with a state ideology which presents itself as normal governmental procedure.”

For his part Claude Lefort in La Complication takes a somewhat different approach. He argues that a crucial and irreducible feature of any totalitarian regime is that it is impossible to localize the source of power. (According to this definition, as Roussot notes in his introduction, Soviet Communism is more “totalitarian” than Nazism.) Moreover, largely because this is the case, it is impossible as well in a totalitarian system to distinguish between dominated and dominator and also what is “political” and what is not. It is therefore legitimate to conclude that “everything becomes political or nothing is any longer political” and that all spheres of human activity are therefore affected, indeed infected.

Todorov echoes these perspectives as well in L’Homme dépayssé in his discussion of the Communist system as an embodiment of totalitarianism. While very much the victim and tool of state authority, for example, what Todorov labels l’homme soviétique nevertheless identifies itself with its automatically and completely, thus obscuring the distinction between “dominated” and “dominator” and making power, in effect, “unlocatable.” Moreover, with power—obfuscated and yet everywhere present, survival and success within the system is reduced to the simplest and basest political impulses—denunciation of one’s inferiors and subservience to one’s superiors.

While the debate surrounding the comparison of Communism and Nazism, in its various moments and guises, obviously stimulated revaluations of the concept of totalitarianism, it is not easy to say in precisely what ways these revaluations affected or infected the comparison, and conversely, in what ways the comparison contributed to fine tuning the model. Certainly one could argue that the renewed discussions of the concept of totalitarianism made it possible to better frame and contextualize a debate that, in the case of Black Book of Communism at least, focused relentlessly on the murderousness—the criminality—of Communism and the equation of that with Nazi criminality. Undoubtedly the broadening of the parameters of the debate made it possible to enrich the comparison itself, and this explains why many leading intellectuals, including Furet, Todorov, Julliard, and Lefort, have chosen to weigh in. As Todorov phrases it in the title of another article on the topic, the time is ripe for “Totalitarianism, one more time.”

As for the influence of the Black Book of Communism’s revelations on the totalitarian model in particular, one can argue that the extent of Communism’s massive criminality and use of terror has made it possible to reprioritize the constituent elements of the totalitarian model or even to add a new, or redefine an old, category. Terror, or perhaps better yet sheer murderousness, should now be placed at the top of the list. This at least appeared to be the view of Alain Besançon in Le Malheur du siècle, which was published a year after Black Book: “That which ties [Communism and Nazism] most closely together is that they ascribed to themselves the right, and even the duty, to kill, and that both did it using methods that resembled each other, and on a scale unknown before in history.”

But as Besançon also asserts, even if murderousness and terror constitute the profoundest links between Communism and Nazism as well as the most crucial building blocks of their respective forms of totalitarianism, “six words” must be spoken before any more systematic analysis is undertaken: “Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka.”

For Besançon, ultimately, the Holocaust makes Nazism unique, and following a careful comparison of Nazism and Stalinism both in historical terms and as totalitarian systems, Ian Kershaw draws the same conclusion. For him the comparison “demonstrates, above all, the historical uniqueness of National Socialism. Any history of the Twentieth Century needs to acknowledge and explain that uniqueness.”

To the degree that the views expressed by Besançon and Kershaw reflect a consensus concerning the debate of the 1990s in France over the comparison of Communism and Nazism (or variations therein) as well as the viability and applicability of the totalitarian model, that debate has not changed greatly with time. As Roussot notes in his introduction, more than thirty years ago Raymond Aron’s comparison of the regimes rejected any final equivalency between Nazism and (Soviet) Communism because of Nazism’s extermination of the Jews.

Does this imply then that the sturm und drang of the recent debate in France over the comparability of Communism and Nazism and the memory of the crimes of both really accomplished little? In his journal for the
year 1997 entitled, appropriately enough, L’Année des fantômes (“The Year of the ghosts”), Jacques Julliard expresses serious concern that, in a year that encompassed the Black Book of Communism controversy, the appearance of Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners in French, and the Papon trial, France was succumbing to a morbid fascination with historical monsters. He concludes bitterly, “There is a Jurassic Park side to all of this.”

Julliard’s view is certainly overly pessimistic, but it does point to the extent to which the history and memory of Nazism and Communism—and Vichy—have been sensationalized, politicized, moralized, and conflated in France during the last decade. It is one of the signal virtues of Stalinism and Nazism: History and Memory Compared to avoid these pitfalls where the histories and legacies of the two systems are concerned while reconfirming the virtues of comparative—and contemporary—history in the necessary and essential effort to understand what Eric Hobsbawm has aptly labeled “the century of extremes.”

Notes


3. This was especially the case when the newspaper Libération organized a roundtable discussion with leading historians of Vichy and the resistance heroes Raymond and Lucie Aubrac in the summer of 1997. At issue were accusations that the Aubracs had betrayed fellow resistance members and misrepresented their actions during the war. The historians found themselves in the uncomfortable roles of interrogators and judges. See Rousso, The Haunting Past (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); and Susan Rubin Suleiman, “History, Heroism, and Narrative Desire: The Aubrac Affair and National Memory of the French Resistance,” South Central Review (forthcoming).

4. French statutes concerning crimes against humanity and the numerous difficulties associated with their application are discussed in detail later in the context of the Papon trial. It is important to stress at this juncture, however, that these laws were not originally intended to be applied to Frenchmen but to former Nazis who had operated in France.

5. For a detailed account of Tourjus’s conviction and its implications, see introduction to Richard J. Golsan, Memory, the Holocaust, and French Justice: The Bouquet and Tourjus Affair (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1996); and Rousso’s and Conan’s chapter on the Tourjus trial in Vichy.


7. Furet, Passing of an Illusion, 163.


24. Kershaw and Lewin, Stalinism and Nazism, 2.
28. Julliard, "Ne dites plus jamais jamais."
29. Lefort, La Complication, 11.