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Introduction

The Legitimacy of an Empirical Comparison

Since the collapse of the Soviet system and the subsequent opening of important archives, the renewal of studies of the USSR and of Communism itself has given a new immediacy to the debate over comparing Nazism and Stalinism, most notably in Germany and in central and eastern Europe. In France the discussion was relaunched by the 1995 publication of François Furet’s Le Passé d’une illusion (The passing of an illusion), a work comprising the latest chapter in the ongoing analysis of the concept of totalitarianism. This is particularly noteworthy because the discussion of totalitarianism, which on the one hand entails a comparison of Nazism and Stalinism (or fascism and Communism) and on the other draws on a specific analysis of these political systems, has never been developed in France to the degree that it has since the 1950s in the Anglo-American and German academic communities. This is so despite the presence of works by Raymond Aron, Claude Lefort, Jean-Pierre Faye, and several others. This lacuna is attributable of course to a number of well-known factors, for example, the influence of the Communist Party on the French intellectual world and the considerable energy invested by the party in legitimizing the largely inaccurate claim that totalitarianism was nothing more than a “Cold War concept.” These efforts, moreover, were largely successful.

Since the publication of Furet’s work, a large number of French publications on Communism or on the Soviet Union either have directly addressed the comparison with Nazism or have involuntarily encouraged discussions that foreground that comparison. In general terms, however, the same cannot be said of works focusing on Nazism. Whether French or foreign in origin, there are few works on this subject whose principle objective is the assessment of the history of Nazism in relation to the theory of totalitarianism. The one exception is the relatively isolated case of the works of Ernst Nolte. In this sense the debate over totalitarianism, even in its current form, retains many of its original attributes, especially those evident since the 1950s and the discussion of the work of Hannah Arendt. From that time on, the debate sought to understand and to reevaluate the history of Stalinism and of Communism in general terms, while leaving aside the history of Nazism (even though the history of Nazism was the principle object of Arendt’s study). Moreover the debate was carried out with political ends in view. Yet these
considerations in no way invalidate the scholarly interest, the intellectual necessity, nor even the moral legitimacy of the comparison, regardless of the results obtained.

It is against this backdrop that the present work was conceived. Its principle aim is to reexamine the comparison of Stalinism and Nazism, but along different lines from those followed by previous studies. The book originated in part at a colloquium organized at the Institute for Contemporary History (Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent) in Paris on January 31, 1997, to address the controversy generated by the publication of Karel Bartosék's Les Aveux des archives (The Revelations of the archives). Even though Bartosék's book dealt only with the history of international Communist organizations after 1945, some of the polemics it generated, whether supportive or critical of its findings, focused ultimately on the comparison of Nazism and Stalinism, even though this was not the book's aim.

The colloquium at the IHTP had a modest ambition. Its purpose was to gather together a wide variety of specialists on Nazism and Communism and to move beyond the usual polemics in order to ascertain what today constitutes the legitimate as well as the illegitimate bases of comparison. This question has not ceased to challenge historians and social scientists for more than a half a century. Entitled "Parallel Historiographies: Nazism and Stalinism Tested by the Archives," the colloquium's aim was to address the comparison through two precise and limited approaches. The first sought to compare the sources, methods, and tools used by historians of Nazism on the one hand and Stalinism and Communism taken as a whole on the other. The second approach was to examine the memories of Communism and Nazism in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Despite enormous historical differences, all of these countries share the double experience of having been occupied by or having allied themselves with the Nazis and then of having been subjected to Stalinism and Soviet domination. Hence the title of the colloquium, which referred not so much to a parallelism between the Nazi and Stalinist experiences as such but rather to the manner in which they have been perceived retrospectively.

If the colloquium succeeded in inspiring a good deal of interest, it also aroused objections. The most pertinent, formulated during the debates themselves by the historian of the Soviet Union Yves Cohen, emphasized the fact that both the historians of Nazism and the historians of Communism continued to hew their own rows, so to speak, while clinging to the respective singularities of the systems they studied. The result was that an empirical comparison based on the most recent findings of historical research was not really undertaken.

The same observation can in fact be made concerning the larger debate in France over the comparison between Nazism and Stalinism. Most of the time this discussion revolves around the political and intellectual legitimacy of the subject, and the outcome inevitably depends on the position of the interlocutors with regard to the question of Communism's intellectual and ideological heritage. This is an obstacle that, for obvious reasons, continues to create problems. For equally obvious reasons the same problem does not arise in relation to Nazism, for there are no defenders of Nazism's "positive heritage" except in certain circles of the extreme right.

On occasion the discussion boggs down in incessant methodological (or supposedly methodological) debates on the question of comparability, that is, of the preestablished positions that would either make possible or preclude comparison, or in controversy over the feasibility of the concept of totalitarianism. These debates often disguise poorly their ideological presuppositions or, conversely, have difficulty making them explicit. Moreover, most of the time, at least among the historians (in principle those best qualified to undertake the comparison), these discussions curiously come to a halt at precisely the moment that a real comparison is about to be undertaken. It is as if such a comparison is superfluous. It is either denounced without further analysis or, conversely, the proximity of the Nazi and Stalinist (or Communist) totalitarian systems, as well as their identical features, are treated as givens. It is striking to see how few analyses exist that examine Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia with equal profundity and deploy a comparable range of knowledge and methodological approaches in studying both.

This observation is especially true of the debate that accompanied the publication of Le Livre noir du communisme (The black book of communism), three of whose authors—Karel Bartosék, Andrzej Paczkowski, and Nicholas Werth—have contributed to the present volume. Without undertaking here an exhaustive critique of this flawed but important book, it is worth noting that a good part of the controversy it produced centered on the legitimacy of comparing Nazism and Stalinism (or Communism taken as a whole) and the manner in which such a study should be conducted. In his widely criticized introduction, Stéphane Courtois alludes on several occasions to the comparison, most notably in a muddled attempt to define the crimes of Communism as crimes meeting the criminal definitions used at Nuremberg and—in an affirmation that caused much ink to flow—in announcing that the respective crimes of Nazism and Communism "were equal," even though
the “singularity of Auschwitz” is not challenged. The “genocide of a class” is tantamount to the “genocide of a race”: the death by starvation of the child of a Ukrainian kulak deliberately subjected to famine by the Stalinist regime “equals” the death by starvation of a Jewish child of the Warsaw ghetto subjected to famine by the Nazi regime.8

These connections are not particularly new. They are also in evidence in some of the great testimonies of Stalinist terror; most notably the widely known works of Margerete Buber-Neumann and those of the Russian writer Vassily Grossman, the author of Vie et destit (Life and Fate).9 These works have formed a part of the rhetorical arsenal of conservative historiography for quite some time, for example, in the work of Ernst Nolte, from whom Courtois borrowed the equation of “genocide of race” and “genocide of class.” In the introduction to Le Livre noir du communisme, which strives to be scholarly, these connections are not proven or demonstrated in the scientific sense of the word. Rather, their value is strictly polemical, although what they call for, in fact, are more nuanced reactions than those generated in the heat of controversy. On the level of morality, there is absolutely no reason to hierarchically rank the victims of Nazism, Stalinism, or any other political system practicing terror. This in no way means, however, that on the level of analysis, all these systems are 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. This could only be established if a real inventory of the crimes were carried out.10 In other words it is not a question here of contesting the legitimacy of the comparison, but of calling into question the necessity of foregrounding it and making it the unifying thread of a work whose principle thrust is not to compare Communism and Nazism but rather to compare almost all the Communist experiments in history to each other. This is already a sufficiently arduous task.

Le Livre noir du communisme is a work exclusively devoted to Communism, to its cost in human lives, to its nature, and to its criminal “essence.” It is certainly not a work on totalitarianism, which is understood here as a theory, making it possible to consider together the Nazi regime and the Soviet system as well as other political regimes of the same type. Moreover the historical comparison of the two regimes is absolutely not in the book’s provenance. Just the same, the historical comparison [made in Courtois’s introduction] has served as a polemical argument, a commercial lever, and a red flag for the media. It has taken on a life of its own. In order to present the new analyses of Communism offered in the book, it was considered necessary to denounce a priori the unequal treatment of the history and above all the memory of Nazism and Stalinism: “The exceptional attention accorded Hitlerian crimes is perfectly justified. It is a response to the survivors’ desire to testify, the researchers’ need to understand, and the moral and political authorities needed to confirm democratic values. But why is there so little heard in public opinion of testimonies dealing with communist crimes? Why this uncomfortable silence on the part of political leaders? And above all, why this ‘academic silence’ concerning the communist catastrophe, which, for eighty years, has involved approximately a third of humankind, and on four continents? Why this inability to place at the center of the analysis of communism a factor as essential as crimes, mass crimes, systematic crimes, indeed crimes against humanity? Isn’t there here a question of a deliberate refusal to know, of a fear of understanding?”

This position ties in, line for line, with the false symmetry recently promoted by Alain Besançon between, on the one hand, the “hypermemoria” of Nazism in the contemporary public mind and, on the other hand, the “amnesia” of Communism.12 To these largely unsupported claims we could answer that the considerable success with the general public of Furet’s essay, or even more, that of Le Livre noir du communisme itself, whose sales in France reached levels of a Goncourt Prize, offers a flagrant denial of this supposed amnesia in the French popular conscience.13 As Jean-Jacques Becker has aptly pointed out, “One could hypothesize—contrary to what has been generally accepted—that there is widespread anticipation of a putting into perspective of the communist phenomenon.”14 In the same way assertions rightly made by François Furet, Alain Besançon or Stéphane Courtois, who confirm that antifascism continues to prosper despite the fact that its target disappeared more than a half century ago, we could reply that anti-Communism finds itself in an identical situation today, for while there is no real adversary, there is nevertheless a temptation to create one out of whole cloth. Anti-Communism finds itself in an identical situation to the antifascism it condemns, in an imitation so often seen in the long history of fascism and Communism, or of antifascism and anti-Communism.

This tendency is in fact inscribed in a current topos that uses the comparison, not on a historical level but on a politico-memorial one, that sets forth for basically ideological ends not the reality and depth of the similarities and differences between the totalitarian regimes, but the way in which people talk about them today in certain circles and the degree of knowledge the public has of the respective activities of these two regimes, which is a very different matter. The most striking thing about these two adopted positions,
even if they contain some truth, is the fact that they make short shrift not only of an actual comparative analysis of Nazism and Communism but also do the same with any concrete history of the memory of Communism, thus transforming perhaps authentic intuitions or generally accepted stories into established truths.  

And this leads to a second claim directly linked to the preceding one. Although the comparison has inspired few truly comparative studies in current French historiography, it occupies a place of choice in contemporary international disputes. The fact that this may be of little help in understanding the eventual relationship between the historical experience of Nazism and Stalinism does not alter the fact that this discussion of memory is a cultural and social fact that deserves to be part of the field of investigation of historians who struggle to include all sides of the problem, provided it is not limited to the narrow space of continental France.

The present work uses as a departure these two established methods; even though it does not pretend to exhaust the subject. It proposes, as a start, to create a historical comparison by limiting it to several targeted aspects and then to examine the comparison from the standpoint of memory by describing the situation in the countries of the former Communist bloc, where this comparison takes on a special acuteness.

Even though an enormous amount has been written on these subjects, it remains necessary to specify beforehand the general hypotheses that underlie this project before presenting the broad outline.

The first stumbling block encountered in this type of comparative study is the necessity of defining or clarifying the terms of the comparison, always a perilous undertaking. In his brilliant book Furet continually hesitates, at least in the terms used, to compare “communism and fascism,”16 “Bolshevism and National-Socialism,”17 or even “Stalinian communism and German National-Socialism.”18 The difficulty is made even greater by the fact that it is not based simply on opposite terms of comparison but also on the terms used for each of the two together and then separately. Must we speak of “fascism” in general and regard Nazism as a variant of fascism, as in Marxist analysis or in certain “totalitarian-type” approaches? Likewise, should we speak of “Communism,” of “Bolshevism,” or of “Stalinism”? Here we have terms that cover neither the same political realities nor the same historical groups. For his part Krzysztof Pomin, in his discussion of totalitarianism, rejects the use of the term “Communism,” inherited from the nineteenth century, and prefers to speak of “Bolshevism” when the analysis is seen in a comparative perspective, a pertinent argument that has the advantage of situating exactly the historic places of the comparison.19

The difficulty is made even greater by the fact that the choice made will always be criticized as ideologically committed. For example, in a rather favorable review of Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison, edited by Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, historian Richard Pipes writes without hesitation that the book as a whole shows “a left-of-center orientation” largely because of the chosen title. In fact, he adds, “the opposite of Nazism is not ‘Stalinism’ but ‘communism.’ In eliminating Lenin and the Leninism from the equation, the authors, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, have adopted the post-Khrushchevian outlook of Stalin as an aberration of the historical evolution of the first communist State.”20 If the criticism is unjust in regard to the analyses within the book, the objection itself is worth taking into account. But the reverse method, comparing without any other form of procedure Nazism and all the forms of Communism regardless of time or place, constitutes an intellectual leap even more difficult to justify on a historical level: can one seriously compare Hitler’s Germany, the USSR of Nikita Khrushchev or Leonid Brezhnev, and the regime of Fidel Castro? Can one compare unhesitatingly the Nazi Party and the Italian Communist Party? Furthermore, this tendency, even if it raises real questions, also shows a political commitment somewhere to the right of center—right: this is the case in the introduction of Le Livre noir du communisme21 and numerous other works published in its wake.22

In the first part of this work, which is an attempt at an exclusively historical comparison, we chose to limit it to Nazism on the one hand (thereby excluding other forms of Fascism) and Stalinism on the other. This choice does not mean that the Leninist period is deliberately excluded from the field of comparison, if only by the fact that contributor Nicholas Werth is a historian who has demonstrated how much the Stalinist system, especially in the rationale of organized terror, owes to its predecessor.23 It is one of the major differences, often emphasized, between Stalin and Hitler: the first inherited a system that survived him; the second founded a system that died with him. Yet this choice eliminates the post-Stalin USSR from the comparison for historical reasons.

Part 2 is placed in a rather different perspective because it compares the two political systems as they now exist in the public space of former popular democracies, and the comparisons take into account either both fascism and Communism in their most general terms, only Nazism and Stalinism, or any other variant of the equation. It is not a question here of defining the best
possible level of the comparison but of analyzing what emerges in the public
space as a fact of memory’s history.

The second stumbling block for any attempt at comparison is the almost
trivial question of knowing what are its interests and its aims, especially if
there is a claim of eliminating all ideological considerations as far as possible.
Without returning to the long list of arguments in favor of such a comparison
priori, and at the same time allowing the reader to decide the relevance of
the outline offered here, two prior reasons that justify such an undertaking
will suffice.

In the first place, on a heuristic level, the principle that demands that
every historical event be reduced to its absolute singularity, thus making any
comparison bound to fail, must be abandoned. Taken to its logical conclusion,
this argument would insist that there is no way to imagine history and thus
make the past intelligible. To affirm, for example, that Nazism and, even more,
the extermination of the Jews are unique historical events means logically
that these phenomena had formerly been, often in an implicit way, compared
and measured using the same yardstick of other a priori similar happenings.
“Totalitarian regimes deny human freedom in an extreme manner,” writes
Hannah Arendt, who makes their obliteration of all freedom the principle
criteria of these regimes. Following this, if we want to understand the nature
of one of these regimes, and a fortiori if we want to prove its uniqueness, it
would be better to compare it to other regimes that deny any freedom than
to compare it to democratic regimes, even if this last also has its legitimacy,
though for other reasons. This is almost a truism, which is worth being
recalled since the question of Nazism’s uniqueness—a demonstrable historical
reality—has today become a dogma and not a concept that allows us to
reflect on the event. Furthermore, to recognize this uniqueness in no way
means that National Socialism would be radically incomparable to every
other political system, if only for the reason that Nazism, like other political
regimes, also borrowed from political systems contemporary to it, beginning
with Italian Fascism. As Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin have so cogently
asserted: “The terror of Stalinism does not need to be minimized to emphasize
the uniqueness of the Holocaust—the only example offered up to now of
the history of a deliberate policy aimed at the total physical destruction of
each member of an ethnic group. There is no equivalent under Stalinism.
Although the waves of terror were evidently massive, and the resulting toll
in human lives enormous, no ethnic group was isolated in order to be totally
annihilated physically. And among Stalin’s victims, an especially heavy tribute
was, we know, exacted from the government and from the party.”

In other words the uniqueness of genocide only shows its true dimen-
sions when it is measured against another mass crime and another freedom-
destroying system.

In the second place, comparing Nazism and Stalinism comes from an in-
tellectual tradition—not simply ideological—that is difficult, even presum-
tuous, to dispose of in an offhand way. This is not the place in which to
retrace the history of this debate, but we must remember that it was born at
the same time as the systems themselves and has never ceased “haunting” the
social sciences. The concept of totalitarianism has been criticized ever since
its appearance, and its principal theorists have clearly seen its limits from the
beginning, knowing that it does not take into account the historical dynamics
of the regimes under consideration, that it is more descriptive than analytical,
and that it has resisted poorly historiographic evolution and the thorough
empirical knowledge that is constantly accumulating on such systems. Finally,
the concept has a tautological character since, if it is considered in its ideal-
typical version, it is essentially constructed following the observation of two
or three historical experiences (fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, or Communism)
to be used later mainly as a frame for interpreting these same experiments.
“Totalitarian societies are basically comparable and each one is historically
unique; why they are the way they are, we do not know,” Carl Friedrich, one
of the principal theorists of totalitarianism, had already written in 1954. 27
Raymond Aron for his part, while developing a theoretical perspective based
on reflections about totalitarianism, refused the kinship between Nazism and
Stalinism by putting foremost, more than Arendt had done, the specificity of
the extermination of the Jews. 28 It remains, however, even after all proposi-
tions are taken into account, that this theory, even with its limitations, is an
almost necessary consideration in any attempt at comparison.

In addition, like all concepts, that of totalitarianism has its history, and it
has evolved, depending on the authors, the places, and the period. We find in
the second part of the present work an idea of its present timeliness in central
and eastern Europe, where the comparison between Nazism and Stalinism
(or Communism) is at once not only more systematic, more “natural,” but
also more fundamental in its stakes than it is in France.

In truth, the term “totalitarianism,” like the spontaneous comparison of
Nazism and Stalinism, is as deeply embedded in common understanding
as in the language of the university, despite the reluctance or hostility it
provokes. It is not possible to see this as a victory of “American Imperialism”
in the semantic Cold War. If it was it would represent a very belated one. In
La Nature du totalitarisme (The nature of totalitarianism), Arendt has already
pointed out that the evermore popular use of the term, going back, according to her, to the days following World War II, meant that the general public was perfectly conscious of the appearance of radically new phenomena in the history of mankind, even if opinion registered a strong resistance to new things. Following in her footsteps, Pomian remarks that “the appearance of a new term in the political lexicon and its propagation and installation in different languages, are not frequent occurrences [. . .], and they generally signal changes in the order of the facts themselves, and becoming conscious of them leads to the creation of neologisms.”

Once we admit that the comparison is a necessary step and once the principles that can be used to defend it are set forth, we must ask ourselves about its intrinsic relevance and the different uses to which it can be put.

If a quick typology is attempted, three objectives can be detected that are not heterogeneous but that coexist to variable degrees in most of the analyses.

The first use, and the most obvious one, arises from the attempt to analyze together two or more systems defined as totalitarian in order to show evidence that they are all types belonging to a single political type. This unavoidable step raises the most problems: What are the best terms for the comparison (a problem raised earlier)? What historical period and what durations should the comparison cover? To be truthful, and at the risk of oversimplifying, the primary product of this objective—and we have seen that historical works that are successful comparisons on this subject are relatively rare—gives the impression that the list of similarities and differences keeps growing at the same rate and that the procedure always stumbles over the same obstacles: the difference of the initial project and the respective intentions of Bolshevism and Nazism, the difference in the level of development of the societies investigated, their unequal life span, the uniqueness of the genocide of the Jews, and so on.

To avoid this difficulty, Kershaw and Lewin propose that our reasoning should not be based on tables of similarities and differences. Rather we should start from the idea that Nazism and Stalinism, to confine ourselves to these two alone, rest on common ground. They were implanted in countries that both experienced authoritarian monarchies before World War I, that had made more-or-less important concessions to parliamentarism; that both possessed a powerful bureaucracy, strong military traditions, a dominant class of large landowners; and that both, in an unequal way, were on the way to industrial modernization (this being very limited in Russia, however). Both finally had imperialist aims in central and eastern Europe and came out of World War I traumatized and in the grip of civil war, even if the upheaval in Germany was in no way as massive as it was in Russia.

At the end of their collective work, which analyzes differences and similarities in the role of dictators, repressions, and the conduct of the war, in the revolutionary nature of political action, and in the problem of “modernization,” they nevertheless conclude that the differences are more important than the similarities. This is a conclusion hinted at in the complementary texts of Philippe Burrin and Nicolas Werth, which appear in the first part of this volume. In addition, Kershaw and Lewin do not subscribe to the commonly held idea—which constitutes one of the key arguments of François Furet—that World War I was the deciding matrix of totalitarian systems that emerged during or in the wake of the conflict. In any case, in the opinion of Kershaw: “The First World War certainly provoked a ‘brutalization’ [a concept developed by George Mosse], but on a very low level compared to what was happening at the same time in Russia. This part of the explanation [of the emergence of totalitarian systems] is not sufficient.”

The second function consists of searching, by comparison, for a better comprehension of each system. Seen from this angle, all the strategies can be uncovered. Thus for Claude LeFort, “The concept of totalitarianism has relevance [. . .] in its application to communism, more so than to Nazism or fascism, only if it designates a regime in which the center of power cannot be located; it is not thought to reside either in someone (a monarch, despot or tyrant), or in several individuals (aristocrats or oligarchies), or, strictly speaking, in the people, if we mean by that the group of individuals who are recognized, not by governments, but by the law, as citizens.”

Kershaw for his part thinks that the idea of totalitarianism is just a way to identify the uniqueness of Nazism: “In the framework of the concept of totalitarianism, National Socialism is the one and only example of a regime which appeared in a country endowed with an advanced industrial economy and with a system of political democracy (and an even older political pluralism). In all other cases—the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and Cuba—the ‘totalitarian phase’ of the setting up of the authoritarian regime took place under backward economic and political conditions, in an agrarian economy, in a poor society without a tradition of political pluralism, not to mention democracy, and where diverse forms of tyranny had traditionally prevailed.”

Along these same lines we can assume that the debate that divided historians of the USSR into two schools of thought, one called “totalitarian”
and the other “revisionist,” had as an objective to find the best keys to interpreting the Soviet system. This did not divide the historians disagreeing on the resemblances or differences with Nazi Germany but rather those of the USSR, who stressed the primacy of politics and ideology, as opposed to others for whom a social analysis of Soviet society took precedence. It is also a characteristic of the debate on the history of Nazism, between “Intentionalists” and “Functionalists,” that pits the partisans of the primacy of ideology against those who argue for the primacy of the historical dynamic of social forces at work in Nazism.

From this perspective the comparison has only a heuristic value—it is only of help in bringing out more clearly the singularities of each system. And from this perspective as well, the theory of totalitarianism, independently of the question of the comparison, was partially invalidated, if only by the fact that it neglected the evolution peculiar to each society caught in the stranglehold of totalitarianism and overestimated their “atomized” character, postulating that the ideological hold had caused the disappearance of any impulse toward inertia, toward dissidence, and indeed toward resistance. This essential point is developed too by Burrin and Werth in part 1.

There is finally a third usage that is the basis for a large part of the theory of totalitarianism, notably in political science and political philosophy and that, paradoxically, was not much taken into account by historians. This concerns the ways totalitarian systems constitute something new in regard to classical tyranny, authoritarian regimes, or other forms of ancient or modern dictatorships. This, we know, is the major contribution of the thought of Hannah Arendt and is, no doubt, the point where the concept of totalitarianism is strongest. At the risk of once again stating a truism or of paraphrasing Arendt, we can point out that, independent of their degree of resemblance or difference, nowhere else in history can one find two political systems so radically different in form from anything known up until then; emerging at the same time, on the same continent, and with a “common compost”; and that became rivals so quickly and then engaged in total war with each other. This issue does not come by definition within the context of contemporary history. It refers back to a long history of political systems, in no way exhausted by historians, and by itself justifies the necessity of pursuing a reflection on the comparison. On its own merits it invites a reading by historians of Arendt’s work.

Of the three usages summarized here, only the second is actually considered in this work as part of what could properly be called a historical comparison. In fact part 1 attempts rather to understand the respective uniqueness of the two systems by accepting the idea of an apparent strong resemblance rather than refining the reading grids that claim to identify only one type. Part 1, therefore, is developed around a common inquiry, alternately argued by specialists of Stalinism and Nazism. It puts forward three distinct issues to be addressed from a long list of possibilities:

The nature and the place of the dictator. In each of the two systems discussed, the analysis seeks to go beyond the apparent similarities of absolute power exercised with equal intensity on both sides and seeks to understand the mechanisms belonging to each kind of domination.

Political violence. The forms, extent, and concrete methods of political violence need to be explored. The approach should not limit itself to superficial resemblance, for example, as in simply comparing the respective number of victims. Especially if such considerations insist on an equal respect for the suffering experienced by both sides, it does not help at all in understanding the nature of the political, social, and cultural processes set in motion.

The “social response” to ideological domination. The degree of adhesion, indifference, refusal, or resistance of Russian and German societies needs to be examined. This is an essential point, facilitated by the most decisive advances in the historiography of Nazism as much as in the more recent one in studying the USSR.

In and of itself, this grid is very incomplete. If it takes into account certain distinctive, habitual criteria of totalitarianism—the existence of supreme leaders, of an ideology with totalitarian aims, of a single party, of a mobilization of the masses through propaganda, of a systematic use of terror—it neglects others. This is in part a voluntary choice, which allows us to avoid classic grids of interpretation while taking into account historiographic criteria that make possible illuminating real differences behind apparent similarities. It is in part an obligatory choice, which makes it necessary to abandon other elements that are just as important, such as the question of the inheritance from the First World War or even questions concerning respective intentions and finalities of the two ideologies, that are treated here only incidentally. Once more, the central objective is to undertake an effective comparison, treating each of the systems considered with the same attention and an equal degree of knowledge and of the difficulties involved. This is an approach rather infrequent in French historiography.
The second part of this work, which concerns the current debate about a "double inheritance" in Central and Eastern Europe, also responds to another imperative, which seems to be part of the same inquiry, even though all of the contributors are not equally convinced of the relevance of taking up a historic comparison as well as a comparison of memory in the same book. This idea comes from the editor of this book and the author of this introduction, but it is also found in the collective work of Kershaw and Lewin. In dealing with the past, it is important to point out the different levels of analysis in the debate over the validity of comparison.

To begin with, a historic level of comparison can be delineated, as in part 1. This is the most frequent. Next, a historiographic level can also be delineated, which is not the history of Nazism and Stalinism per se but the manner, the tools, and the concepts used by historians and the social sciences to write these histories. We have seen several instances of astonishing similarities in the respective historiographical debates over Nazism and Stalinism, especially in weighing political as opposed to social factors. No doubt these debates result from a general state of historiography, notably the evolution of paradigms in social history. They are also without doubt the consequence of the fact that the majority of historians express themselves from the same "place," recognizing in common a belief in democratic values antithetic to the two systems studied. But they are perhaps too an obvious indication that the comparison is based on objective elements and, because of this, can create a rather important element of the historical comparison strictly speaking, even if we must be careful about accepting this last argument. We debated introducing this dimension in this way into the work (it was one of the objectives of the roundtable of the IHED), but it seems to have appeared naturally, in the different areas that were studied, to the degree that each of the authors of the first part had developed his analysis in systematically taking into account recent developments in historiographic debates in his respective area. In this regard it should be pointed out that Philippe Burrin and Nicolas Werth belong to the same generation of historians, and as consequence both seek to move beyond the quarrels that have stirred debate in their fields in recent years. Burrin, especially, has tried in the same way as Kershaw to go beyond the debate between Intentionalists and Functionalists. Werth places himself in a perspective that tries to go beyond the quarrels between the "totalitarian" school and the "revisionist" school. It is necessary to add, however, that the respective levels of the historiography of Nazism and Stalinism are not equivalent, that the first benefits from an advantage due to a rapid development that goes back three decades and to archives almost completely accessible since the end of World War II (thanks to the Allied occupation), while the second is still in the full process of development since the end of the Cold War. This is especially true in particular areas treated by Werth: for example, the question of knowing to what extent Russian society was able to join or participate in the Bolshevik project and in what ways. This issue still inspires many monographs, while studies dealing with German society and its relationship to Nazism have existed for a long time.

The comparison of memories requires a distinct approach since the comparison itself emphasizes the historical legacy of the systems as well as the managing of the past and its traumas. To study it makes one conscious of the dangers of confusing the objectives and the uses of a comparison already heavily weighted with ideological concerns. This can be a liberating experience for the historian, who does occasionally find himself held prisoner, so to speak, by the emotional stakes involved when dealing with memory.

In this sense, examining the former "other Europe" rather than France or Western Europe is justified by the fact that in these countries the comparison between Nazism and Stalinism comes not only from a discussion among academics or intellectuals but also concerns the entire society. The countries of the former Communist bloc were all confronted, before 1945 and Soviet domination, with the experience of Nazism, whether it was by occupation and partition by the Third Reich, as was the case in Poland or in part of Czechoslovakia, or they became allies of Nazi Germany, as was the case with Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Some experienced both situations, as was especially true of the thorny case of the former GDR (German Democratic Republic, or East Germany).

These choices seem all the more interesting since all of these countries have known for a decade the contradictions and the dilemmas of a painful administration in the recent past, of the uncertain politics of memory, of a truncated debate in most instances, of an eventual purge, and of the judgment of crimes committed by defunct Communist regimes. Even if this level of comparison is of a completely different type than a strictly historical comparison of the Nazi and Stalinist governments, it nevertheless seems necessary to take it into account. Beyond any similarities or differences between the two regimes, they have a point in common that no one would have been able to perceive even a decade ago: they have both bequeathed to posterity very difficult questions about how to write their history and how to insert it in a collective memory and a national heritage.
Part II then is constructed around a common query to which each contributor responded in his own way. Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine minutely analyzes the different uses of the political stakes in comparing Nazism and Stalinism in Romania by insisting on the reappearance of revisionist tendencies. Paul Gravvoiho ponders the evolution of the historiographic debate and historical institutions in Hungary, emphasizing the importance of writing history as a political weapon. François Prisson-Roche examines the little-known case of Bulgaria, where debates of the “double experience” have brought up taboo questions such as the fate of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War. Andriez Paczkowski highlights the problems raised by the memory of the “double occupation” of Poland by the Nazis and Soviets, which never had, at least until the fall of the Communist system, the same stature in Polish social memory. Finally, Étienne François has the difficult task of taking up the East German question and the immense problem raised by the gulf that existed between the memory of Nazism in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany, the former West Germany), based on the recognition of German culpability, and in the GDR, based on the fiction of the “anti-fascist state,” a subject he examines from the angle of the opening of the Stasi archives.

By way of concluding, Pierre Hassner and Krzysztof Pomian provide their reactions to the texts presented here, applying to them their competence in the issues involved and their familiarity with the lengthy history of the concept of totalitarianism.

In concluding this rapid typology of levels of analyses and registers of discourse, we want to make clear that this work attempts to avoid two of them: the ideological level of analysis and the “historical-judiciary” stance. If it is obvious that the comparison of Nazism and Communism can spring from a desire to stigmatize the Communist heritage and its deliberate refusal to offer an explicit or implicit self-defense, we must resist the temptation to exempt it from scientific analysis on the pretext of undesirable uses of such work that can be made on an ideological level. This is one of the classic traps of the study of contemporary history, and it can have serious consequences if historians succumb to this form of self-censorship. In this sense the comparison is approached here with care, though without false modesty or second-guessing by authors who have expressed themselves with complete freedom and from a variety of viewpoints.

The “historical-judiciary” stance, however, is more difficult to avoid, for the historian cannot free himself entirely from a tendency to judge or pass moral judgment, especially when examining subjects like these. He must refuse to don the robe of a judge in the court of History and must not think of himself as the “avenger of the people,” otherwise he conflates historical concepts and criminal accusations, which are no doubt relevant in the case of a trial, but not in the framework of a historical analysis. In this sense this volume does not propose to “repair” the crimes of the past nor to “serve” memory. It does not call for any kind of “Nuremberg of Communism.” It aspires only to be a modest contribution to the understanding of the two greatest scourges of the twentieth century.

Translated by Lucy B. Golsan and Richard J. Golsan

Notes


3. See his most recent work, Der europäische Burgerkrieg, 1917–1945, Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus, Munich, Herbig, 1987. One can also refer to his point of view on Le Passé d’une illusion in ”Sur la théorie du totalitarisme,” Le Débat, no. 89, March–April 1996, pp. 139–146. See also his dialogue with François Furet and Ernst Nolte, Fascisme et communisme, Paris, Commentaire/Plon, 1998. Ernst Nolte thinks that “the historical-genetic vision” of the theory of totalitarianism, which sees in Nazism not only a regime of the same kind as Bolshevism but also a “reaction” to this last—an idea that has contributed to releasing the famous “quarrel of historians” in Germany—constitutes one of the “rare and indispensable paradigms” that will finally be accepted, even if it takes “several decades.” “Sur la théorie du totalitarisme,” p. 146.


5. The day of the 11.111 was divided into three parts. After a problematical introduction from François Bédarida (11.111-caps [Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique]) (of which a reworked version appeared in François Bédarida, Histoire Critique et responsabilité, Paris/Bruxelles, 11.111/Complexe, 2003), a first debate, presided over by Pierre Aycoberry (University of Strasbourg-II), reunited Jean Solchany (11.111 of Lyon) and Philippe Burdin (Institut des hautes études internationales de Genève), who spoke on the present historiography of Nazism. A second debate, presided over...
by Pierre Hassner (CERI-CNRS), brought together Nicolas Werth (IHDE-CNRS), Stéphane Courtois (University of Paris X-CNRS), and Serge Woikow (University of Dijon) to speak on the historiography of the USSR and the Communist international. Finally, a discussion chaired by Krzysztof Pomian (Institut d'études politiques de Varsovie), Karel Bartosek (IHDE-CNRS), Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine (LASE-CNRS), and Étienne François (director of the Marc-Bloch Center of Berlin), who spoke on the historiography of Nazism and Communism in the popular ex-democracies. The work presented here does not constitute an inventory of the acts of that day, even though in the second part the majority of the contributions of the last roundtable are addressed.

6. The scholarly dialogue between Furet and Nolte is not included in this critique. Among recent attempts by historians to take up the comparison on an empirical level, see "Sur les camps de concentration au XXe siècle," Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire, no. 54, April–June 1997, which takes up part of the proceedings of the conference organized by Lucette Valsans at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in June 1995. The most recent important reference on the subject, always from the viewpoint of an empirical comparison, remains the collective work edited by Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, who have brought together several specialists from both camps and directly confront an essential question: to what point can the theory of totalitarianism continue to "stand up against" the scholarly progress made on Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison, Cambridge University Press, 1997. This work, which has greatly inspired us, is one of the best references on the subject. Yet it has not caused much discussion in France, even though there was an enormous reaction to Furet's comments and also Le Libre du communisme. Among the rare reviews, see especially Christian Ingrao, Annales, 53rd year, no. 1, January–February 1998, pp. 172–176. Notwithstanding, the work of Kershaw, as a specialist on Nazism, and his positions on the theory of totalitarianism have since become well known in France (see note 32 below).


12. Alain Besançon, Le Malheur du siècle: Sur le communisme, le nazisme et l'unité de la Shoah, Paris, Fayard, 1998. On this same theme, see the numerous issues recently appearing in the review Commentaire: "Sur le fascisme, le communisme, et l'histoire du XXe siècle" (vol. 20, no. 79, autumn 1997); the issue that includes articles by Alain Besançon, Martin Malia, Pierre Chaunu, and the exchanges between François Furet and Ernst Nolte, op. cit. (vol. 20, no. 80, winter 1997–1998); "Communisme, fascisme, et histoire du XXe siècle" (vol. 21, no. 81, spring 1998, [anniversary number]); "Mémoire et oubli du communisme" (vol. 21, no. 82, summer 1998); and "Mémoire et oubli du communisme" (vol. 21, no. 83, autumn 1998).

13. If the "hypermesia" of Nazism is easily verified, "amnesia" is a preposition that remains to be supported. For example, see Alain Besançon, "Mémoire et oubli du bolchevisme," (paper presented at the annual public session of the five academies, October 21, 1997), reprinted in idem, Le Malheur du siècle, p. 157. The only concrete reference cited in support of the demonstration of an inequality of treatment between the memory of Nazism and that of Communism is in the comparison of the appearance of several key words taken from a base of given on the Internet from the newspaper Le Monde between 1990 and 1997.


15. Regarding Communist memory in France, there are relatively few works given the recurrence of the theme in public debate and in the polemics. See the pioneering work of Marie-Claire Lavabre, Le Fil rouge: Sociologie de la mémoire communiste, Paris, Presses de la VNSP, 1994.

16. This is the title of chapter 6 of Furet's Passé d'une illusion, and the title of his work (posthumous) with Ernst Nolte that includes an inventory of their correspondence, Furet and Nolte, op. cit.

17. Furet, Le Passé d'une illusion, p. 238.

18. Ibid., p. 218.


20. A review that appeared in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, vol. 13, no. 1, spring 1999, pp. 117–119. One can also refer for this to Richard Pipes, one of the great

21. It is partly the political orientation given to this work by the publisher [Robert LaHont] and one of the chief contributors, Stéphane Courtois, that provoked the public disagreement with two other contributors, Jean-Louis Margolin and Nicolas Werth. See Margolin and Werth, "Communisme: Le Retour à l’histoire," Le Monde, November 14, 1997; and Stéphane Courtois, "Comprendre la tragédie communiste," ibid., September 20, 1997.

22. Among the most recent, other than the works of Ernst Nolte, see Alain de Benoist, Communisme et nazisme: 25 réflexions sur le totalitarisme au XXe siècle (1917–1989), Paris, Le Labyrinthe, 1998. Benoist’s work is in the classic vein of radical totalitarianism, postulating an identity between the two political systems. [Alain de Benoist is a leading figure in the extreme-right intelligentsia.]

23. See, among others, the first part, which Werth devotes to the USSR: "Un État contre son peuple: Violences, répressions, terreur en Union Soviétique," in Le Livre noir du communisme, pp. 39–312. This piece supplements and refines the texts he presents in part 1 below.


28. On this point see the analysis in Michelle-Irène Brudny de Launay, preface to La Nature du totalitarisme, p. 19 and passim.


38. See especially Werth, L’Histoire de l’URSS."