Totalitarianism and Its Pillars: The Cases of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia

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Outline

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The first part of the 20th century was characterized by numerous global economic issues, major military conflicts and the rise of totalitarianism. Some of these features can be traced in the contemporary society, which makes it essential to understand the nature and major causes of the development of totalitarian regimes. The cases of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia can be regarded as classical illustrations of the totalitarian regimes, and extensive research on the matter has been implemented (Tudoroiu, 2014). The two types of totalitarianism share a lot of features in common irrespective of quite fundamental differences in some aspect. This paper includes a brief comparison of totalitarian regimes in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany and reveals some of the major risk factors that can lead to the rise of totalitarianism in the contemporary society.

Prior to considering the major pillars of totalitarianism, it is necessary to identify the theoretical paradigm to be used. Tudoroiu (2017) notes that two major approaches have been used to analyze the nature of totalitarianism that implied the focus on the dictator's personality or the analysis of the social context. Some scholars tend to believe that the dictator's personality shaped the ways totalitarianism was manifested. Others think that although the dictators exercised almost unlimited power in their countries, social contexts still shaped their decisions and the overall development of the society. In this paper, a mix of the two theoretical frameworks will be used as both factors are both influential, which will be illustrated below. At that, Hitler and Stalin are products of the era they lived in. Therefore, social contexts can be seen as primary factors affecting the appearance and development of totalitarianism.

First, the influence of social contexts on the rise of totalitarianism will be considered. The rise of totalitarianism in Germany and Russia of the first part of the 20th century started after revolutionary events and significant social turmoil. It is possible to note that economic

constraints and social controversies that exist in every society are one of the premises of the rise of totalitarianism. Revolutions took place in both countries in the late 1910s, and several ideologies were competing. Communism was one of these platforms as many people in different countries saw it as the best alternative to monarchies that caused considerable dissatisfaction. The victory of this ideology in Russia, ironically, contributed to the rise of another ideology in other European countries including Germany (Pauley, 2014). Nazism was regarded as the panacea that can save Germany from the terrors of Communism. The peculiarities of these ideologies shaped the totalitarian regimes in the countries under study.

For instance, Communists promulgated the ideas of atheism while Nazi leaders tried to be seen as the protectors of Christianity. The Nazi protected private property while Communists tried to eliminate it completely. Communists focused on the engagement of other nations in the world revolution while Nazi leaders did not believe in the equality of all nations as they promulgated the supremacy of their people. Although the ideologies seem to be different in details, they can be regarded as a potent pillar of totalitarianism. Pauley (2014) stresses that the ideologies were indeed religions as they could be characterized by the following features: both societies had charismatic leaders, martyrs, heretics, ceremonies, concepts of paradise and hell, and so on. Thus, in both societies, ruling elites tried to use them as the primary code or even religion.

Irrespective of numerous events that are now regarded as inexplicable mistakes, people were simply trying to create new just societies, but the aftermaths of the First World War prevented them from achieving their goals. The lack of resources (as well as a number of controversies deeply rooted in the post-war agreements) and the shock of the Great War made nations accept quite drastic tools and measures (Pauley, 2014). The abundance of ideas and

certain confusion prevented democratic principles from fostering, which led to people's desire to follow a strong and charismatic leader. Additionally, all religions have a concept of a savior, and since the reigning ideologies were religions for Russia and Germany of the first part of the 20th century, it was inevitable that a dictator will cease the power. People chose Hitler as their savior and gave their votes to be saved from the chaos and economic issues (Toland, 2014). In Russia, people had no real power to choose the leaders of the party, but they eagerly accepted Stalin as their protector and savior (Kotkin, 2014). The appearance of a charismatic leader who is regarded as a savior is, therefore, another pillar of totalitarianism.

Finally, one of the major tools employed to maintain the created order and keep the power was propaganda. Since the ideologies that supported the totalitarian regimes were used as religions, they were associated with beliefs, values, legends, and so on (Pauley, 2014). To create these beliefs and values, Hitler and Stalin used propaganda. The two leaders managed to affect the public opinion or even form it through media. Irrespective of numerous economic, social and cultural failures, Soviet newspapers, radio, and films revealed the benefits of the communist ideology and principles. People's attention was drawn to rather utopian pictures. People were also taught to believe that enemies were always trying to attack and destroy their happy lives. These tools were also common for the Nazi propaganda. Both regimes managed to control people's thoughts and beliefs through shaping the reality. They created an alternative reality that helped the two regimes maintain the control in their countries.

Apart from the impact of social contexts, it is essential to look into some psychological traits of the leaders to identify some peculiarities of totalitarianism. Both leaders participated in certain military activities and were accustomed to violence. For instance, Hitler took part in the First World War as a soldier, and he tried to cease political power with the use of violence though

this attempt was unsuccessful (Toland, 2014). Stalin was involved in numerous terroristic activities and often used intimidation as one of the primary tools of achieving his goals (Kotkin, 2014). Therefore, violence and even terror were regarded as effective measures of ceasing and maintaining power.

Importantly, both leaders used intimidation and violence when dealing with their close allies. Pauley (2014) mentions that both leaders' personalities were characterized by certain maniacal fears and being unconfident. These traits are often regarded as a result of the two dictators' family backgrounds as both had father-son issues and often had conflicts with peers. These traits also affected the way Hitler and Stalin gained and maintained power. Hitler managed to get rid of people who helped him gain power (Toland, 2014). Stalin physically destroyed his opponents, rivals, and the most dangerous personalities in the party while intimidating subordinates and numerous members of Politburo members (Zimmerman, 2016). This violence was also apparent on different levels and was a norm for the two societies. People were terrified as no one knew who could be the next person to go to prison or a concentration camp, or who could be executed. Nevertheless, people accepted these measures as they believed that their savior had to undertake such harsh measures for the good of all. Intimidation is another pillar of totalitarianism.

In conclusion, the major pillars of totalitarianism, at least, in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia include social unrest and economic instability, the reign of a particular ideology, the use of violence, intimidation, and terror, and the prevalence of propaganda in many spheres. Importantly, both social contexts and personal traits of the leaders were instrumental in the development of the totalitarian regimes in the countries in question. Hitler and Stalin were regarded as saviors who could create a new just society out of dashes of monarchy and post-war

world. People were prepared to tolerate such drastic measures as violence and intimidation as they saw these steps as necessary but short-term negative aspects. The rise of terrorism, global financial constraints, and the shortage of resources are similar features to the ones that existed in the first part of the 20th century. Therefore, the risk of the appearance of totalitarian societies is quite high. The existing totalitarian regimes (for example, in such countries as North Korea) can be seen as a kind of warning to other nations as well as the entire humanity. It is essential to remember that totalitarianism leads to the growth of terror and violence that can ultimately result in major military conflicts. It is essential to make sure that people will not seek for charismatic leaders who will take complete control over their lives.

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