Totalitarianism Essay, Research Paper

Totalitarianism

The focus of this paper will examine the political and cultural phenomena of totalitarianism, mass production death and institutionalized genocide or the extirpation of ones personality in a concentration camp or gulag setting.

There was a driving force towards this absolute social and political control known as totalitarianism. It first began as Fascism as Walter Laqueur’s points out in his book Fascism: Past, Present, and Future where he writes, “It rose and spread quickly, because of the ravages of World War I and the political and spiritual vacuum they had left behind. The continent had been shaken by violent political and economic convulsions, and in half of Europe the old conservative order had disappeared but a new one had not been accepted. The moral certainties of the world of yesterday had vanished and the middle classes had become impoverished. To some, the last vestiges of civilization seemed threatened by a new, mysterious, highly contagious phenomenon – Bolshevism. Those who believed that a strong leadership and a new order were needed but who found Communism unacceptable in view of its internationalism and egalitarianism craved a political alternative.” Most apply the term Fascism primarily to the NAZI and Italian regimes during the decades from the 1920s to the 1940s. By incorporating the Stalinist period of the 1930s to the 1950s the term totalitarianism is more applicable.

The resources used to show how some European countries and the Soviet Union incorporated totalitarianism are Sources of the Western Tradition, by Perry, Peden, and Von Laue, Alain Resnais’ film Night and Fog, Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. The latter two will be used to show the effect of totalitarianism and the relationship of the film to the novel. It will be necessary to see how the European countries and the Soviet Union came to this point of totalitarianism before you can understand the power that the ruling class had over the masses. The Sources of the Western Tradition will be used to establish this historical background and corroborative evidence on totalitarianism.

The seeds of totalitarianism were planted in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was then that a new breed of thinkers rejected “the Enlightenment belief in the essential rationality of human beings.” Friedrich Nietzsche, a writer of this period led attacks on democracy, universal suffrage, equality and socialism. He “called for the emergence of the overman or superman, a higher type of man who asserts himself, and lives life with a fierce joy. The overman aspires to self-perfection. He was critical of the Western rational tradition.

Another man of this period who supported irrationalism and social thought was Gaetano Mosca. Mosca believed that “a class that rules and a class that is ruled” characterize all societies. Those that ruled believe they have the “right to its privileges and power, and the masses become resigned to their lowly station.” The minority rulers who took power seemed to have a high level of organization, while the masses they controlled were unable and powerless to unite against the ruling class. These thoughts came from Mocsa’s principal work Elements of a Political Society, which was later, translated under the title The Ruling Class.

Vilfredo Pareto, a countryman of Mosca also believed in nonrational politics. It was his belief that throughout history that those in power spoke to the people not about the reality of a situation, but in a way that what get them what the rulers wanted in they end. He focused on the elitists of society. “The elite exists in all societies and governs them even in cases where the regime in appearance is highly democratic.” He believed that men could not governed by reasoning, without the use of force. That force is the basis of all social organization.

While Pareto and Mosca were focusing on the elitists, Gustave LeBon concentrated on mass psychology. In his work The Crowd, LeBon writes, “The substitution of an unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age.” Those in power would lead not by logic, but by the emotional elements of the periods. He believed that crowds were powerless to reason and allowed judgments to be forced upon them. “Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images.”

The ideas put forth by Nietzsche, Mosca, Pareto, and LeBon were employed by the twentieth century dictators, who used these theories for the purpose of seizing and maintaining the power the had over the masses. They did not lead to the start of World War I, but their ideas helped further the war. The principal causes of World War I were belligerent, irrational and extreme nationalism. One’s country was placed above everything and war was embodied as heroic and “as the highest expression of individual and national life.” The war was the turning point in western history. It led to the formation of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany.

When World War I ended the face of Europe and Russia changed. The Germans were unhappy with the Treaty of Versailles because it did not follow the Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States. Wilson’s views of a peace treaty were idealistic, he stated to the conference, “that every people in the world shall choose its own masters and govern its own destinies, not as we wish, but as it wishes.” He “sought a peace of justice and reconciliation, one based on democratic and Christian ideals.” Instead those at the peace conference led by Georges Clemenceau called for revenge against Germany. The treaty would leave Germany weakened both economically and militarily and that this was planned by Anglo-French delegation, which sought to punish Germany.

During the same period following World War I there was turmoil in Russia. The tsarist regime had survived an overthrow of the government in 1905, but within a decade there was upheaval again in Russia. The Liberalists had hoped that a constitutional government would make advances and cause Russia, which was a backward country, to catch up to the West, but the radicals led by V.I. Lenin, “expected the Russian workers to become the vanguard of a revolutionary advance that would bring freedom and justice to oppressed peoples all over the world.” Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown in March of 1917, a liberal provisional government was formed and the Germans were going to partition the country. The Bolsheviks led by Lenin seized power in November of 1917. The seeds were now ready to grow.

Shortly after the treaty was signed there was unrest in many European countries. Fascism was on the rise in Italy, Germany and other European countries. Although each country had a different view they all “shared a hatred of liberalism, democracy and communism; a commitment to aggressive nationalism; and a glorification of the party leader. The fascist leaders had followed the ideas of Nietzsche, Mosca, Pareto, and LeBon. The leaders such as Benito Mussolini of Italy and Adolf Hitler of Germany mobilize and manipulated the masses. The people of these countries were easily attracted to the fascist movements. They were afraid of a communist takeover, such as what happened in Russia, the veterans of World War I were mostly unemployed and impoverished, which made the choice of joining the fascist party ideal because it “glorified combat and organized private armies” and the parliamentary governments were unable to deal with the problems of postwar Europe. “Fascists glorified instinct, will, and blood as the true forces of life; they openly attacked the ideals of reason, liberty and equality At the center of German fascism (National Socialism or Nazism) was a bizarre racial mythology that preached the superiority of the German race and the inferiority of others, particularly Jews and Slavs. Adolf Hitler, the German leader of the Nazi party, was extremely successful in controlling the state and minds of the masses. He was able to establish a “totalitarian state that controlled all phases of political, social and cultural life.” Hitler manipulated the lives of the German people by using modern methods of communication. He preyed on the misery of the German people by using simple explanations they could relate to. Hitler explained Germany’s misfortunes on the Versailles Treaty, the Weimar Republic and by denouncing the Jews. The world had never seen such absolute tyranny and total control. “The Nazi regime aspired to shape a “new man,” one who possessed a sense of mission and was willing to devote body and soul to the party, its ideology, and its leader, Der Fuhrer, who was endowed with attributes of infallibility.”

While Hitler was controlling the masses in Germany, Joseph Stalin was assuming control of the leadership of Soviet Russia, which was left vacant after Lenin’s death in 1924. “The product of violence and revolutionary agitation since youth, Stalin started a second revolution far more brutal then Lenin’s.” Stalin terrorizes the Soviet people who would not comply with his plan to reform the country both economically and socially. Threatening the people with “corrective labor” did this.

Hitler and Stalin had both created totalitarian regimes. Each would use the power they had to annihilate their enemies and had mass murdered millions of people. In the Soviet Union “all those accused of disloyalty to the party and not killed outright ended up in one of the gulags(Soviet forced labor camp). “Over conquered Europe the Nazis imposed a “New Order” marked by exploitation, torture, and mass murder.” Hitler created concentration camps, where his elite SS troops exterminated millions of Jews. These murders were carried out “with dedication and idealism; they believed that they were exterminating subhumans who threatened the German nation.” The horrors of the German concentration camps are portrayed in the film Night and Fog and those of the Soviet labor camps in the novel A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.

Although both regimes used their power to control the masses and did not hesitate to destroy their enemies by murdering them, but Hitler’s annihilation of the Jews seemed to be “systematic” as portrayed in the film. You saw the Jews being herded like cattle into railroad cars and taken to places like Auschwitz, Struthof, and Dachau. The approach taken in the labor camps of the Soviet Union or the concentration camps of Germany was to break the spirit of the people there. They were dressed poorly wearing blue striped uniforms in the concentration camps and black uniforms that had numbers painted on them in the labor camps. Those in the concentration camps were tattooed with numbers. The prisoners in both camps were used as a labor force. The food was rationed and they were barely fed and if you had a spoon, such as Ivan Denisovich, it must be kept hidden. The prisoners in each camp would lick the bowls clean so as to not miss one drop of food. Neither of the camps permitted any worshipping and if you were caught it meant death. The camps were similar in how they were built as both had interior and exterior fences of barbed wire with lookout towers watching over the entire camp. The concentration camps had kapos and SS men who supervised the prisoners. The Soviet prisoners, who were called zeks, were watched over by the squad leaders, their deputies and the soviet guards.

Those in the Soviet labor camps who were political enemies of the state were there for twenty five years and the others such as Ivan who were convicted as German spies were given ten years. In either case if you survived you had a chance of getting your freedom. This was not the case in the German concentration camps, in fact beginning in 1942 the Jews were systematically exterminated.

The concentration and labor camps are no longer, but the world should never forget what happened to the people who were held prisoner or the millions who lost their lives.