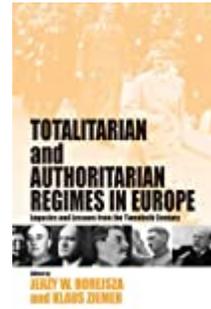




Jerzy W. Borejsza, Klaus Ziemer. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes in Europe: Legacies and Lessons from the Twentieth Century.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. XVI + 607 S. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-641-2.



David D. Roberts. *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics.* New York and London: Routledge, 2006. xii + 579 pp. ISBN 978-0-203-08784-8; \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-19279-8.

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Published on H-German (June, 2006)

How “Total” was Twentieth-Century Europe?

The term, “totalitarianism,” was initially a catchword in political fights. Only later did it acquire heuristic value as an analytical instrument. Italian fascism’s political opponents coined the term in the early 1920s, yet it was also portrayed by the fascists in a positive light. In the wake of Nazism and the end of Hitler’s regime, Cold War thought on totalitarianism espoused the common fight against the ongoing threat of communism, as defined by scholars such as Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1956. Over time, the comparison between communism and fascism, which some regarded as equally totalitarian, was refuted, because the social basis and fundamental aims of the “Left” and “Right” were demonstrably dissimilar. Theories of fascism claimed to be superior forms of explanation, while only some authors insisted that both notions, fascism and totalitarianism, could be used simultaneously to create a different cognitive effect.

It is certainly not a coincidence that a revival of com-

parative analysis of totalitarianism has re-emerged after the end of the East-West conflict. Especially in countries that suffered under both leftist and rightist dictatorships, comparative efforts were an obvious choice. While some pains were taken to count casualties and crimes of the regimes in “black books” and in other forms, in Germany (but not only there) the idea of comparisons between the two succeeding dictatorships gained momentum. This juxtaposition could be applied to a whole set of sectoral or comprehensive questions. Sometimes such analyses carried with them a political undertone of the triumphalism of liberal democracy, celebrating its victory over totalitarian temptations and sufferings. Such accounts now form the threads of historical master narratives in many countries.

David D. Roberts has taken all this background into account and published one of the most comprehensive and exhaustive books on totalitarianism ever written.

Roberts has proven himself highly qualified to write such a book, after several investigations into Italian history, syndicalism and Benedetto Croce. With his most recent tome, *Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (1995), Roberts has expanded his field of research to overarching and often comparative historical structures. Nonetheless, I finished the book with a feeling of weariness.

The Totalitarian Experiment focuses primarily on Mussolini's Italy, Soviet Russia in the Stalin era and Germany under National Socialism. His examinations of these particular cases stem from their common leanings towards a sort of "maximal" totalitarianism. Roberts insists that a few encompassing or generalized structures explain their development. His aim is to paint with a "broad brush and a certain reflexive thickness in light of the conceptual obstacles and ethical sensitivities at work" (p. 4). The narrative begins with the nineteenth-century antecedents of totalitarianism after the French Revolution and the development of democratic and liberal regimes, as well as their respective political movements. While liberalism bridged numerous cleavages, alternatives in many directions also developed. Karl Marx and the "Leninist departure," Giovanni Gentile and Friedrich Nietzsche are among the many discursively enumerated and evaluated intellectuals. Unfortunately, such emphasis on ideas and ideology only infrequently includes concrete social or political developments.

For Roberts, the Great War was a decisive point at which intellectual possibilities could become real social and political movements. "Alternative modernity" (p. 200) was not only a German phenomenon. New revolutionary regimes succeeded in Italy and Russia, while Weimar Germany remained crisis-ridden. Three core chapters, covering more than a third of the book, are dedicated to these individual regimes. "The Totalitarian Dynamics of Leninism-Stalinism," "Conflicted Totalitarianism in Fascist Italy" and "The Hollow Triumph of the Will in Nazi Germany" are the titles of the respective chapters. Roberts examines leadership, political mobilization and the formation of an alternative elite, as well as eugenics and euthanasia, as extreme symptoms of totalitarian extra-moral thinking and acting. Mass murder and genocidal actions also play prominent roles in the story. What Zygmunt Bauman has called the "gardening" effect, or what Roberts sometimes aptly addresses as "social engineering" are elements of all three regimes: idealistic attempts to construct new societies—often with contempt for human life. The book's subtitle alludes to such designs. As Roberts writes, "[t]he atmosphere of drama, of

violence, even of potential catastrophe, evident in Russia, Italy and Germany enhanced the sense of the need and the scope for new modes of collective action" (p. 212).

Roberts also pinpoints a shared origin of these designs: "In each of our three cases, the origination agency came from a new, self-appointed and self-described elite, defined not by socio-economic place but by consciousness, values, will, and spirit and claiming a unique capacity to spearhead what it claimed was essential change beyond the liberal mainstream" (p. 418). In the Italian case, however, although Roberts concedes that many proponents of totalitarian control and action did not necessarily succeed, the overall claim remains important to his main argument, which is substantiated to some extent by Roberts' tremendous mastery of the literature by authors who have previously used the "T"-word, whose works he ties together to great effect.

Although the attractivity of totalitarianism seems drastically reduced after World War II, Roberts insists that ever-changing situations may produce a new kind of totalitarian claims. Thus, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon requires a recognition that totalitarianism is not only of historical interest. This position on his part is reflected in urgings for future research, as when he writes, "[t]he scope for fruitful reconnection, from within a weak-totalist framework, with the earlier radicalism has yet to be adequately assessed" (p. 486) to concrete warnings. According to Roberts, "[t]he post-ideological dimensions of the totalitarian departure" still exist (p. 469). While Roberts's book is well written and researched, some critical observations remain. Regardless of the semantics surrounding the phenomenon of totalitarianism, a book published in 2006 that does not take into account ongoing ideological debates in the United States or in other parts of the world is problematic. For example, further consideration of developments in the Islamic world, African and Latin American states or even in some remnants in Europe for that matter, would be welcome. Understandably, however, such considerations would be more common in a political science treatise and are all but peripheral to the history of events. Roberts's approach is focused on Europe, but he does not reflect these general or globalized trends, even though his text claims to be in the service of that broader goal. In his concluding chapter, he frequently writes from a "we" perspective. This word choice is in many cases a *pluralis maiestatis* for the author, but in not-so-rare cases, this "we" claims to be a consensus speaker with general awareness of our days—an American historian speaking about Europe?

My second observation is directed to the source basis of the work. It would be unfair to characterize the book as a mere history of ideas. But most of Roberts's argument, nevertheless, is constructed around the work of contemporary philosophers, publicists and theoreticians—who either wrote for or against totalitarian regimes. The second group of sources includes relevant authors who have observed and analyzed totalizing regimes—Hannah Arendt, Leszek Kolakowski and Zygmunt Bauman are among the most prominent of the authors he cites. Roberts is permanently quoting and re-quoting, commenting, accepting, refuting. Thus he often entangles the ideas of other with own narrative. "Axes of Debates in Light of Some Recent Studies" (p. 279) is a subchapter on Italian fascism, but large parts of the book can be read as an endless, repetitive movement of thinking and picking up pieces: what author A correctly observes, may nevertheless not be everything, as author B aptly remarks when he draws on author C, and so on. Roberts has a third group of sources: historians who have worked on aspects of the social, political or cultural history referenced. Detlef Peukert, Omer Bartov, Christopher Browning and Ernst Nolte are outstanding personalities in this investigation of German totalitarianism. And with these and other historians, Roberts sometimes delves in the lower field of historical explanation, but only quickly to return to comments on previous and present-day authors.

One is hard-pressed to find glaring distortions or mistakes in the volume, but a kind of arbitrariness of argument and sources emerges in the narrative structure. Of course it is legitimate to quote Vaclav Havel in this context, as well as Milan Kundera's fictional characters, and even a police officer from the notorious German Police Battalion 101. But Roberts's bird's-eye has developed an overview of such an amazing amount of scholarship and interpretation over decades that his moves toward more concrete statements with examples, social situations or quotations are not always convincing. Around 100 pages of footnotes are proof of Roberts' scholarship, but the fact that no bibliography is included does not seem to be wholly accidental.

The German Historical Institute in Warsaw in 2000 recently hosted a large international conference on roughly the same topic and the resulting volume can juxtaposed with Roberts' book. The conference dealt specifically with the experience of Poland, especially in the twentieth century, which was spent between two mighty and destructive dictatorial neighbors. All thirty-four contributions cannot, of course, be fully discussed

or even presented here. Briefly, however, Jerzy Borejsza outlines a framework in a non-theoretical approach, examining the same three totalitarian regimes as Roberts did. He, too, finds more similarities than differences between Stalin's and Hitler's expansionist regimes. But he also puts forward a challenge to comparisons of other authoritarian regimes with this kind of maximal total rule—notably including Pilsudski's Poland. He finds a "totalitarian heritage" (p. 9) in other mass movements with similar phraseology. While not wholly original, his use of the "secular religiosity" explanatory variable also proves fruitful. Borejsza, furthermore, does not hesitate to name the profound differences between Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union in terms of the length of the regimes and their criminal characters. Dietrich Beyrau offers an empirical overview of the "intellectual servants" during the rule of National Socialism and Stalinism. In his ten-point summary, he rejects modernity theories and applies the notion of secular religiosity when dealing with ideologies. Last but not least, he emphasizes intellectuals as the transmitters of totalitarian messages.

One section of the collection is devoted to historiography. Martin Sabrow deals with the difficult question of "self-historicism" in the GDR after 1989, while Wolfgang Schieder gives an informative overview of West Germany's dealings with its Nazi past. Klaus Ziemer, as a political scientist and the director of the German Historical Institute, provides a categorical report on the difficulties of totalitarian regimes in decline and their corresponding challenges to building democracies. Articles on criminal law (Jörg Arnold) and the opening of archives (Joachim Gauck) provide important overviews for understanding totalitarian countries. Eckhard Jesse, one of the more ardent scholarly supporters of totalitarian typologies for many decades, again compares Nazi Germany and the GDR, but also differentiates the two regimes. One of the best (though in comparison with his many other contributions not original) chapters is provided by Norbert Frei, who considers West Germany's "Nazi legacy," which is in a way comparable to Jens Petersen's piece on the notion of totalitarianism in postwar Italy.

The other contributions can only be mentioned in summary. There is a relatively large discussion on the Polish experience, while around twenty other case studies deal with a broad range of other European countries—slightly favoring former Soviet bloc states—but also France, Italy and Austria. There are no concluding remarks to the volume, although this is not necessarily a disadvantage. Taken together, the articles form an interesting work which does not necessarily have a sharp

focus, but is nonetheless full of innovative information, some of which is not yet well-known. This sort of work seems to be a much more fruitful enterprise than yet another bird's-eye view claiming to classify every bit of evidence in one big overall picture of twentieth-century European totalitarian regimes. Empirical research thus again proves a more fecund source of historical evidence than middle-order theories and broad notions.

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Citation: Jost Dülffer. Review of Borejsza, Jerzy W.; Ziemer, Klaus, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes in Europe: Legacies and Lessons from the Twentieth Century* and Roberts, David D., *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

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