Introduction

Comparing Dictatorships

> 'In Russia and in Germany – and wherever totalitarianism penetrated – men were fired by a fanatical faith, by an absolute unquestioning certainty which rejected the critical attitude of modern man. Totalitarianism in Russia and Germany broke the dikes of civilization which the nineteenth century had believed lasting.' Hans Kohn, 1949[1]

The temptation to compare Hitler and Stalin is a compelling one. They are popularly regarded as the twin demons of the twentieth century, responsible for different reasons and in different ways for more violent deaths than any other men in history. They sit uneasily in comparison with other contemporary dictators or with those in earlier times. To set Stalin and Hitler side by side is to join company with two of the historical giants of the modern age, whose dictatorships met head-to-head in the greatest and costliest of all armed conflicts.

Two questions immediately arise: can the Stalin and Hitler dictatorships be compared? Should they be compared? Tzvetan Todorov, in a recent book on the crisis of the twentieth century, has answered yes to both questions, on the ground that they shared the common characteristics of a single political genus: totalitarianism.[2] This is an answer with a long pedigree. In the 1950s, when the West confronted Soviet communism so shortly after fighting Hitler, it was easy to see both men as 'totalitarian' leaders, dominating systems that tried to impose an absolute and ruthless authority over the populations under their central control. Western political scientists tried to fathom out how they had defeated one monstrous dictatorship, only to be faced with a

second, apparently even more sinister and unyielding than the first. However, the development of a model for the ideal or typical totalitarian regime glossed over very real differences between systems classified as 'totalitarian'. The term itself came to be regarded as a description of the apparatus of power and repression, ignoring the regime's wider social, cultural and moral ambitions, which is what the term had originally encompassed when it was first coined in the 1920s in Mussolini's Italy. Historians by the 1960s generally turned their back on the idea of a generic 'totalitarian' system, preferring to focus on a narrative that emphasized the peculiar character of each national dictatorship, and played down the resemblances.

Since the collapse of European communism in 1989–91, discussion of the two dictatorships has been refocused. A more historically sophisticated definition of totalitarianism has been developed, one that highlights the extent to which the systems were driven by a positive vision of an exclusive social and cultural utopia (often described with the term 'political religion'), while recognizing that the political and social practices of the regime were often very different from the utopian aspirations. It is no longer necessary to rely on a crude political-science model of 'totalitarianism' to define the two dictatorships; over the past dozen years the detailed historical knowledge of both the German and the Soviet regimes has been transformed, thanks on the one hand to the *glasnost* revelations in the Soviet Union and the successor states, and on the other to a wave of critical scholarship in Germany that has opened up many aspects of the Hitler regime hitherto cloaked in silence. This research allows us to say with confidence, as Todorov does, that the two systems were also 'significantly different from each other', while sharing a common totalitarian complexion.[3]

The revelation of the scale and premeditated nature of Stalinist mass murder has contributed to the view that Stalin was no better than Hitler. 'Nazism and Communism, equally criminal' ran the title of an article published in France in 1997 by Alain Besançon. It has even been suggested that a calculus of evil might exist which could make it possible to determine with more scientific precision which of the two men was most wicked, though this was not Besançon's intention.[4] The shock to former Marxists and fellow-travellers of Soviet communism to discover that the Stalin regime really was built on blood unscrupulously

spilled, and ideals distorted beyond recognition, produced a powerful backlash. The publication in France in 1997 of *The Black Book of Communism*, by former French Marxists, showed how far the left had moved in recognizing that Stalin's dictatorship was based on a savage criminality.[5] A recent study has no doubt that Stalin was a psychopath; studies of Hitler's 'mind' focus on the pathology of evil.[6] The implicit assumption – that both Stalin and Hitler were cut from the same bloodstained cloth – has blurred any real distinction between them. Yet such a comparison is just as intellectually barren as the earlier attempt to tar all dictatorships with the same brush of undifferentiated totalitarianism. No one doubts the horrors at the heart of the two dictatorships, but it is a futile exercise to compare the violence and criminality of the two regimes simply in order to make them appear more like each other, or to try to discover by statistical reconstruction which was the more murderous. The historian's responsibility is not to prove which of the two men was the more evil or deranged, but to try to understand the differing historical processes and states of mind that led both these dictatorships to murder on such a colossal scale.

This book is a contribution to that understanding. For all the efforts to define the Hitler and Stalin dictatorships as models of a shared totalitarian impulse, or a common moral depravity, equally guilty of unspeakable crimes, there has been remarkably little literature that offers a direct historical, rather than polemical comparison. Here it is necessary to explain what *The Dictators* is *not* about. The book is not a twin biography, though Hitler and Stalin feature throughout the narrative. Alan Bullock, in his monumental dual biography *Parallel Lives*, published in 1991, interwove the personal history of the two dictators, and this approach does not need to be repeated.[7] There are now excellent individual lives of both men, which have reconstructed every aspect of their biographies in careful detail.[8] Their life histories are among the most closely examined of any historical actors. Nor is *The Dictators* a straightforward narrative history of the two systems. There are many excellent accounts of both, which again require no reiteration.[9] *The Dictators* has been written with two purposes in mind: first, to supply an empirical foundation on which to construct any discussion of what made the two systems either similar or different; second, to write a comparative 'operational' history of the two systems

in order to answer the large historical question about how personal dictatorship actually worked. The answer to this question is central to understanding how the two dictatorships emerged and what kept them both in being until the dictators' deaths.

Some areas of convergence are clearly visible, though the differences are no less striking. Both dictatorships emerged at a particular historical moment and owed something to historical forces which can usefully be compared. Both were representative in an extreme form of the idea of the 'super-personality', whose roots are said to lie in the work of the German philosopher-poet Friedrich Nietzsche. Both displayed obvious operational similarities, in the nature of the state security apparatus, the exploitation of the camp on a wide scale, the complete control of cultural production, or the construction of a social utopia on a mountain of corpses. These are not accidental comparisons. Both systems were aware of the other, and reacted to that knowledge. Hitler's dictatorship eventually launched a war of annihilation in order to eradicate Stalin's dictatorship. Both dictators also briefly reflected on what might have been if they had co-operated rather than fought each other. 'Together with the Germans,' Stalin is said to have remarked, 'we would have been invincible.'[10] Hitler, in February 1945, assessing the options he might have taken in the past, assumed that 'in a spirit of implacable realism on both sides' he and Stalin 'could have created a situation in which a durable entente would have been possible'.[11] Humanity was mercifully saved from this grim partnership because more divided than united the ambitions of the two men.

The dictatorships were not constructed and run by one man alone, however unrestricted the theoretical basis of his power. The recognition that dictatorship flourished on wide complicity, fuelled by a variety of motives from idealism to fear, makes greater sense of their durability and of the horrors both perpetrated. Both were regimes with wide popular backing as well as deliberate victimization. They were systems that in an extraordinarily short period of time transformed the values and social aspirations of their populations. They were both revolutionary systems which released enormous social energies and a terrible violence. The relationship between ruler and ruled was complex and multi-dimensional, not simply based on submission or terror. There is now no doubt that each dictatorship depended on winning

the endorsement or co-operation of the majority of the people they ruled, and that they did not survive only from the fear that they inspired. They each developed a powerful sense of their own legitimacy, which was shared by much of the population; this sense of moral certainty can only be comprehended by unravelling the threads of the moral garb in which the two systems were dressed.

During the course of writing *The Dictators* it became clear how important it was to reconstruct as faithfully as possible the world in which they operated, however alien or fantastical much of it now appears sixty years later. To do this, it has been impossible to overlook the dictators' own words, either written or spoken. For most historical characters this might seem to be stating the obvious, but in these two cases there has been a reluctance to engage with the views of men whose actions appear to speak louder than their words. Hitler's writing is usually dismissed as irrational, muddled or unreadable. Stalin has always been regarded as an intellectual pigmy, with little or nothing to contribute to mainstream Marxism. Yet in each case the dictator said or wrote a great deal, and on an exceptionally wide range of subjects. They both saw themselves as figures on a very large historical canvas. They had views on politics, leadership, law, nature, culture, science, social structures, military strategy, technology, philosophy and history. These ideas have to be understood on their own terms, because they influenced the decisions both men took and shaped their political preferences, and, because of the nature of their authority, influenced in turn the wide circle of politicians and officials around them. They were not intellectuals (for whom neither man had much respect – 'They are totally useless and detrimental', Hitler once asserted[12]), but they did in each case define the parameters of public political discourse and exclude the ideas and attitudes of which they disapproved. Their role in shaping ideology was central, not marginal; so, too, was the role ideology played in shaping the dictatorships.[13]

These ideas did not develop in a vacuum. Neither dictatorship was imposed from outside like some alien visitation. Neither was a historical aberration, incapable of rational explanation, though they are often treated as if they were special, discrete histories, separated off from what went before and what came afterwards. The dictatorships have to be placed in context to understand the ideas, political

behaviour and social ambitions that defined each. That context is both European and, more narrowly, Russian and German. They were the product of political, cultural and intellectual forces that were the common stock of early twentieth-century Europe. They were also, and more directly, the product of particular societies whose earlier histories profoundly shaped the character and direction of the two systems.

The common denominator was the impact of the First World War. Neither dictator would ever have achieved supreme power in two of the largest and most powerful world states without that upheaval. The war was massively traumatic for European society, but a more profound upheaval for German and Russian society than it was for the prosperous and politically stable states of western Europe and North America. Stalin was a creature of the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, which transformed monarchist Russia in a matter of years; Hitler's radical nationalism was forged from the moral and physical disorder of defeated Germany as the old imperial order fell apart. Both states had much in common. They had both been defeated in the more limited sense that they had sued for an armistice because they could not continue the war effort. Failure in war opened the way in each state to a transformation of the political landscape. Russia went from Tsarist empire to communist republic in nine months; Germany went from authoritarian empire to parliamentary republic in less than a week. These changes provoked widespread political violence and economic crisis. The Bolsheviks only succeeded in consolidating control of the former empire in 1921, after four years of civil war and the establishment of an authoritarian one-party state. Germany experienced two different revolutionary movements, one communist, one nationalist; the second was used to defeat the first in the early years of the German republic, but was then stifled as the victorious Allies helped the republican government briefly to stabilize the new system. Both states experienced a hyper-inflation that destroyed the currency entirely and dispossessed anyone with monetary wealth. In the Soviet Union this served revolutionary purposes by ruining the bourgeoisie; in Germany it ruined a whole generation of German savers whose resentments helped to fuel the later rise of Hitler's brand of nationalism.[14] Both states were regarded as pariah states by the rest of the international community, the Soviet Union because it was communist,

Germany because it was held responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914. This sense of isolation pushed both states towards a more extreme form of revolutionary politics and the eventual emergence of dictatorship.

Germany and the Soviet Union reacted to the seismic shifts in politics and society ushered in by the Great War in ways that were determined by their different complexion. Germany was a more developed state, with two-thirds of its population working in industry and services, an established bureaucracy, an effective national system of schooling, and a world-class scientific reputation. Russia was predominantly rural, with some four-fifths of its people working in the countryside, though not all as farmers; welfare and education were both under-developed by the standards of the rest of Europe, and regional differences were more marked as a result of great variations in climate and the imperial character of Russian expansion across Asia in the nineteenth century. Yet in some important respects the division between Germany as a 'modern' state and Russia as a 'backward' state can be exaggerated. Russia had an extensive modern bureaucracy, a highly developed culture (Dostoevsky was particularly popular in Germany before 1914), a rapidly growing industrial and trading economy (which made her the fifth largest by 1914) and a small but high-quality scientific and engineering sector, among whose achievements was the first multi-engined heavy bomber, built in 1914.

In terms of political culture the gap was also less wide than might at first appear. Both were federal systems with a good deal of decentralized administration; neither was a full parliamentary state, though the Tsar enjoyed wider powers than the Kaiser; more important, in neither system did modern political parties enjoy the kind of political responsibility in government that prepared them adequately for what happened after the war. In each state there also existed a sharp polarization in politics, and a language of political exclusion against the radical enemies of the empire; each state, dominated by conservative elites, had political police forces, and each regarded radical nationalism and Marxism as forces to be contained and combated. Though political liberalism of a more western kind existed in Russia and Germany before 1914, it was a powerful force in neither, and was soon swept aside in the 1920s. If the two states that gave rise to dictatorship had

anything in common it was an ambivalent attitude to the western model of development. Under the unfavourable conditions of the 1920s important political forces in the Soviet Union and Germany turned their back on the victorious West and pursued a more revolutionary course. Dictatorship was not in either case an inevitable or necessary outcome of that history, but one that is comprehensible in terms of the political culture and moral outlook that preceded them, and of the failure of alternative models of historical development. Circumstances shaped the eventual emergence of dictatorship as much as the ambitions of their central actors. To recognize that the two dictatorships were products of a particular set of historical conditions reduces the temptation to see them only as a monstrous historical caesura, for which historians are obliged to use a special set of surgical instruments when they dissect them.

The structure of *The Dictators* is narrative in only a loose sense. It begins with the rise to power and ends with war and racism, but the matter in between is explored through a number of central themes essential to understanding how and why dictatorship functioned the way it did. Not everything is given equal weight. There is little here on foreign policy or on the actual course of the military conflict except where this is obviously relevant. Some familiar, and dramatic, episodes are not covered in detail where they do not contribute directly to the explanation. The thematic approach has one particular advantage. It has proved possible to disaggregate some important issues that are usually treated as a unity. For example, the 'Great Terror' of 1937–8 in the Soviet Union has many distinct components which have their own origins and trajectories. A coherent 'Great Terror' is a historical construct rather than a reality. The terror appears in most of the chapters that follow, a product of a number of distinct pressures and ambitions which combined to produce a deadly conjuncture in the mid-1930s. The same can be said of the Holocaust. German anti-Semitism also appears in every chapter, but the strands that contributed to genocide – biological politics, the world 'Jewish conspiracy', the war with 'Jewish-Bolshevism', issues of national definition and identity – become coherent only at the point in late 1941 and early 1942 when the key decisions were finally made to resolve these many different issues through systematic mass murder. Reality is more fractured and

less historically clear-cut than much of the conventional narrative of the two dictatorships suggests.

Comparison is not the same as equivalence. Each of the thematic chapters has been structured in ways to make clear the contrasts between the two systems, not only the glaring differences of geographical and social circumstances, but less obtrusive differences in ideas, political practice and institutional development. There are clear differences between the two men: Stalin, obsessed with details of policy and the daily control of those around him; Hitler, a man of grand visions and sporadic, if decisive, interventions. No attempt has been made here to suggest that they were the same kind of personality (which they clearly were not), or that a generic 'dictator' or a generic 'dictatorship' can be deduced from just these two examples. There are, nonetheless, striking similarities in the ways the dictatorships operated, the way in which popular support was courted and sustained, the way in which state repression was set up and the legal system subverted, in the appropriation and exploitation of culture, in the expression of popular militarism and the waging of total war. For all the differences in historical circumstance, structure and political outlook, the patterns of complicity and resistance, terror and consensus, social organization and social ambition bear clear resemblances and, in some cases, a common European root. They were each the fruit of distinct violent, utopian revolutionary movements which defy neat political categorization.

There remains an essential difference between the two systems that no comparison should overlook. The Stalinist regime, and the Soviet system that produced it, was formally committed to building a communist utopia, and found thousands of communists outside the Soviet Union (whose varieties of Marxism often had little in common with the Soviet version or with Soviet reality) who were willing to endorse it because of their hostility to contemporary capitalism. Hitler and National Socialism hated Marxism, as did a great many Europeans outside Germany. Hitler was unswervingly committed to constructing a new European order based on racial hierarchy and the cultural superiority of Germanic Europe. Despite their common rejection of European liberalism and humanism, their revolutionary social ambitions, their collectivism – both exclusive and discriminatory – and

the important role played by science in shaping their social ambitions, the ideologies were distinctively different, which explains the eventual hegemonic war between them. Soviet communism was intended to be an instrument for human progress, however imperfectly crafted it now appears, whereas National Socialism was from its very nature an instrument for the progress of a particular people.

This claim for the social ambitions of the Soviet Union may ring very hollow knowing what has now been revealed about the murderous character of Stalin's rule. Social development under Soviet dictatorship was, as the exiled Soviet writer Viktor Serge observed in his satirical novel of the Stalin years, completely ambiguous: 'There is sure progress under this barbarism,' reflects one of Serge's doomed communist characters, 'progress under this retrogression. We are all dead men under a reprieve, but the face of the earth has been changed.'[15] People in both dictatorships had to come to terms with the cost in political freedom or human dignity or truth that had to be paid so they could be included in the new society. Though the ideological destinations were distinctively different, each dictatorship exposed a wide gulf between the stated goal and the social reality. Bridging the gulf was a process that lay at the heart of dictatorship as it distorted reality and terribly abused those who objected. These processes were closely related in the two regimes, Soviet and German; they form the core of the analysis of dictatorship with which this book is chiefly concerned.

I

Stalin and Hitler: Paths to Dictatorship

> '. . . for a people's liberation from a great oppression, or for the elimination of a bitter distress, or for the satisfaction of its soul, restless because it has grown insecure – Fate some day bestows upon it the man endowed for this purpose, who finally brings the long yearned-for fulfilment.'
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> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1925[1]

It is spring 1924. The plenum of the Communist Party of Russia (Bolsheviks) convened on 18 May a few days before the Thirteenth Congress of the Party. That same day, Lenin's widow handed over to the committee a sealed letter painfully dictated by her invalid husband in December 1922. Five copies were made, each closed with sealing wax. Lenin's instructions to his wife were to hand the letter over to the next congress of the party in 1923, for he was too ill to address the delegates himself, but she waited until after his death a year later on 21 January 1924. The letter contained his political testament. It was opened and read out to select members of the congress delegations, and discussed by the Central Committee. The testament is best remembered for Lenin's condemnation of Stalin: 'Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary [in April 1922], has concentrated unlimited power in his hands, and I am not convinced that he will always manage to use that power with sufficient care.'[2] Stalin knew the content even before it was opened; one of Lenin's secretaries, worried by the potential impact of the testament, had shown it to Stalin just after Lenin had finished dictating it. After circulating it to a handful of party leaders, Stalin had issued a curt instruction to Lenin's