THE EUROPEAN HISTORY SERIES

HITLER, STALIN, AND MUSSOLINI

TOTALITARIANISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BRUCE F. PAULEY

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Cover: Details from photos of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini. The Hitler portrait shows him addressing the German Reichstag in Berlin on September 1, 1939, when he issued his declaration of war against Poland, thus starting World War II. The highly stylized photograph, which was used for Nazi propaganda and appeared on the front pages of German newspapers, shows a calm but determined and confident leader dressed in a simple uniform, prepared to lead his country into a presumably certain victory. For information on the other photos, see the photoessay. All courtesy of the Picture Archive of the Austrian National Library.

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THE EUROPEAN HISTORY SERIES

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GENERAL EDITOR FOR HISTORY

FOR MY FIRST GRANDCHILD

ALENA MARIE PAULEY

AND FOR ALL MY FUTURE GRANDCHILDREN

MAY THEY LIVE IN A WORLD

FREE FROM TOTALITARIANISM

AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

FOREWORD

Now more than ever there is a need for books dealing with significant themes in European history, books offering fresh interpretations of events which continue to affect Europe and the world. The end of the Cold War has changed Europe, and to understand the changes, a knowledge of European history is vital. Although there is no shortage of newspaper stories and television reports about politics and life in Europe today, there is a need for interpretation of these developments as well as background information that neither television nor newspapers can provide. At the same time, scholarly interpretations of European history itself are changing.

A guide to understanding Europe begins with knowledge of its history. To understand European history is also to better understand much of the American past because many of America's deepest roots are in Europe. And in these days of increasingly global economic activity, more American men and women journey to Europe for business as well as personal travel. In both respects, knowledge of European history can deepen one's understanding, experience, and effectiveness.

The European History Series introduces readers to the excitement of European history through concise books about the great events, issues, and personalities of Europe's past. Here are accounts of the powerful political and religious movements which shaped European life in the past and which have influenced events in Europe today. Colorful stories of rogues and heroines, tyrants, rebels, fanatics, generals, statesmen, kings, queens, emperors, and ordinary people are contained in these concise studies of major themes and problems in European history.

Each volume in the series examines an issue, event, or era which posed a problem of interpretation for historians. The chosen topics are neither obscure nor narrow. These books are neither historiographical essays, nor substitutes for textbooks, nor monographs with endless numbers of footnotes. Much

thought and care have been given to their writing style to avoid academic jargon and overspecialized focus. Authors of the European History Series have been selected not only for their recognized scholarship but also for their ability to write for the general reader. Using primary and secondary sources in their writing, these authors bring alive the great moments in European history rather than simply cram factual material into the pages of their books. The authors combine more in-depth interpretation than is found in the usual survey accounts with synthesis of the finest scholarly works, but, above all, they seek to write absorbing historical narrative.

Each volume contains a bibliographical essay which introduces readers to the most significant works dealing with their subject. These are works that are generally available in American public and college libraries. It is hoped that the bibliographical essays will enable readers to follow their interests in further reading about particular pieces of the fascinating European past described in this series.

Keith Eubank
Series Editor

PREFACE

"Totalitarianism" is one of the most controversial terms of the twentieth century. First used by Italy's democratic critics in the mid-1920s to describe the new Fascist regime, it gained currency in Anglo-Saxon countries during the 1930s in reference to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as well. It became extremely popular between the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, a time when the two dictatorships were virtual allies. However, once the Soviets became enemies of the Nazis, and especially after the American intervention into the war in December 1941, the term suddenly became a political embarrassment and disappeared from public discourse. With the opening of the Cold War in the late 1940s and 1950s, following the Soviet occupation of East Central Europe, the term reached a new peak of popularity only to fall into disfavor during subsequent decades when relations between the Soviet Union and the West improved.

Fading memories of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Benito Mussolini made "totalitarianism" an anachronism at best, and a polemic at worst, loosely applied only to a country's most diabolical enemies. Scholars from the 1960s to the 1980s were particularly loath to use a term that could label them as unreconstructed cold warriors and preferred the term "authoritarian" to describe the Soviet Union of their day. Members of President Ronald Reagan's administration, however, were eager to revive the term after his election in 1980. The biggest catalysts for changed thinking, however, resulted from the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. Interestingly enough, those people who had actually lived in totalitarian states were not the least reluctant about using the term once they were finally free to do so.

Whatever they may be called, the dictatorships of Germany, the Soviet Union, and Italy were breakthroughs in the physical and intellectual control of their own populations, and the dicta-

tors of Communist Russia and Nazi Germany slaughtered more people than any other rulers in the history of the world, ancient or modern, with the probable exception of their fellow totalitarian ruler Mao Tse-tung in Communist China.

All of the totalitarian dictators are remarkable both for what they intentionally accomplished and for what they achieved despite themselves. Mussolini greatly enlarged Italy's colonial empire but wound up losing it all. He concentrated more power in his hands than any of his predecessors; but in the process he created such revulsion that a postwar constitution established a premiership so weak that Italy has experienced new government heads an average of once a year for the last half century. No one since Alexander the Great changed so large a portion of the world as much in just twelve years as did Hitler. He wanted to build a great continental empire and managed instead to lose a quarter of Germany's pre-1937 territory and to leave his country, as well as the Continent, divided. He carried the concepts of nationalism, racism, and dictatorship to unheard of heights, but in so doing he created a backlash that thoroughly discredited all three ideas, most of all his favorite doctrine of racism. Lenin and Stalin wanted to eliminate deeply ingrained Russian habits of slackness and inefficiency, as well as their country's economic backwardness. They succeeded instead in discouraging creativity, polluting the environment, and leaving the Soviet Union still far behind its rivals in the West.

In the pantheon of historical monsters, Adolf Hitler has long held pride of place for most students of history. His evil reputation is well deserved, but his placement in a special category apart from Stalin is probably due to the far greater documentation of his crimes than to the objective facts. The total collapse of Nazi Germany, the postwar Nuremberg Trials, and the early access to Nazi archives have provided historians with a bonanza of raw historical materials that even now have by no means been fully exhausted. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, remained comparatively sealed off to Western historians until its downfall in 1991; its archives are only now beginning to open up, revealing contents far uglier than even the most ardent anti-Communists had imagined. Fascist Italy, by comparison, has often received an almost benevolent treatment from historians, when

they have considered it at all. Mussolini and Italian Fascism have frequently been depicted as either slightly comical or relatively harmless. This reputation is undeserved. That the Fascists inflicted only moderate destruction on foreign states can be attributed to Italy's lack of human and natural resources and the backward state of its economy, not to a tolerant leader or even to a peace-loving population. Losing wars is seldom popular, and Italy began losing almost as soon as it entered World War II.

All of the dictatorships, but again especially those of the Soviet Union and Germany, succeeded in deporting, imprisoning, and killing their most productive workers and intellectuals, thus contributing to their own ultimate demise. Hitler eliminated by one means or another most of the half-million Jews who had lived in Germany when he came to power in 1933, even though the Jewish community had produced half the country's Nobel Prize winners. The destruction of the German Jewish community was merely the beginning of the Holocaust which eventually claimed the lives of 5 million to 6 million European Jews and nearly as many non-Jews. Stalin actually managed to outdo Hitler to become by far the biggest mass murderer in history by slaughtering at least 20 million people. All of them, unlike Hitler's victims, were citizens of his own country and killed in peacetime; often they were his nation's most productive inhabitants. All of these deaths, one should hasten to add, represent only those people whose murder can be directly attributed to the three dictators. They do not include the tens of millions of soldiers and civilians who died as a result of Hitler's launching of World War II or Stalin's disastrous military tactics.

This book does not purport to be a complete history of Europe's three twentieth-century totalitarian dictatorships. Such a work would require many volumes and, if based on original research, would be far beyond the capacity of any one historian. My goal in these pages is much more modest, but nevertheless important. It is to evaluate some of the many theories historians have proposed as to why the totalitarian movements arose and seized power, how they utilized their unprecedented authority, and why they ultimately failed. For well over half a century, the subject has produced endless controversies, only a few of which can be alluded to herein.

The destructiveness and indeed self-destructiveness of the regimes is patently obvious. If any system of government deserves to be called evil, it is surely totalitarianism. And yet if totalitarianism had been nothing more than terror and nihilism, one would be at a loss to explain its popularity with a substantial part of the subject populations. There is no question that short-term apparent achievements usually disguised long-term baneful goals. But to be fair to the people who lived under totalitarianism, students of history must be ever mindful that those people did not enjoy the benefit of hindsight. To understand totalitarianism, or indeed any historical subject, one must begin at the beginning, not at the end.

This work has benefited enormously from classroom discussions I have had with students at the University of Central Florida over the past twenty-five years. In addition, several of my colleagues at UCF, including Carole Adams, Charles Killinger, Edmund Kallina, and John Evans, graciously consented to read all or portions of the manuscript. I received much moral and material support from my chairman, Richard Crepeau, as well as from Dean Kathryn Seidel, Provost Gary Whitehouse, and President John Hitt. UCF also greatly facilitated the writing of this book by providing me with a sabbatical leave. My thanks also go to Charles F. Delzell, emeritus professor at Vanderbilt University, Professor Gilbert McArthur of the College of William and Mary, and George M. Kren of Kansas State University for reading the manuscript and offering excellent suggestions. I gained valuable insights into East German totalitarianism at a summer seminar in 1993 at Yale University sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by Professor Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. A special debt of gratitude is owed to the editor of *The European History Series*, Professor Keith Eubank, who invited me to contribute to it and saved me from making many errors of fact and judgment. I alone, of course, remain responsible for any mistakes that may remain in this book. My wife, Marianne, whom I met in a class on totalitarianism, once again patiently sacrificed many outings so that the writing of this book could be brought to a timely conclusion.

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1 / THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

DEFINITIONS OF TOTALITARIANISM

Surprisingly, there has been a greater agreement among historians about how to define totalitarianism than there has been about whether the definition actually fits any of the states usually described as totalitarian. Advocates of the term stress: (1) the extraordinary powers of the leader, (2) the importance of an exclusivist ideology, (3) the existence of a single mass party, (4) a secret police prepared to use terror to eradicate all domestic opposition, (5) a monopoly of the communications media as well as over the educational systems, and (6) a determination to change basic social, artistic, and literary values.

Much less agreement can be found among historians about the importance of purges to totalitarianism, the role of state economic planning, and the degree to which citizens of totalitarian states were able to maintain some sort of private life. Scholars who object to the term altogether note that even in the Soviet Union and Germany, where the governments were the most powerful, many individuals maintained private lives comparatively free of authoritarian controls. In the Soviet Union there were competing factions, interest groups, and bureaucratic networks that could defy government decrees. And industrial and military leaders in Germany as well as the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy all retained considerable autonomy. Proponents of the totalitarian concept, on the other hand, assert that it was an ideal, which, like all ideals, could never be perfectly achieved.

The argument between ideals and practices is an old one, and it has been applied to any number of political, historical, and even artistic terms. Was the United States really a democracy in

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when slavery was legal and women were denied the franchise? Has there ever been a perfect democracy, even in fifth-century B.C. Athens? Is there even a definition of "democracy" that would apply to all states claiming such status? For that matter, are there universally accepted definitions of "freedom" or "class?" Obviously, to insist on the perfect implementation of political ideals would make all classifications impossible.

The totalitarian dictators did not in fact control every facet of their respective country's existence. They were free, however, to reach major decisions without consulting other individuals or institutions. They were not bound by any laws or customs and were unlikely to be affected by appeals to conscience, sentiment, or pity. They were not even restrained by official ideology because they alone decided what the ideology du jour should be; they did not hesitate to reverse previously held ideological positions however much they might deny it.

In many ways, totalitarianism was a secularized religion complete with charismatic leaders, sacred books (with old and new testaments), prophets, martyrs, saints, disciples, heretics, hymns, ceremonies, processions, and concepts of heaven and hell. True believers claimed to be in possession of the one revealed truth which could not be disputed on the basis of rational arguments. There were chosen people who belonged to the "right" class or race and nonbelievers and nonfavored groups that had to be eradicated from the righteous community by instruments of inquisition. The young were to be thoroughly indoctrinated in the new "religion" so that it would be perpetuated indefinitely. It is no wonder, therefore, that many traditional religious leaders soon realized that they were competing with the totalitarian leaders and parties for the very soul of the people.

Comparisons between democratic and totalitarian ideals help in the understanding of both. Surprisingly, there are some superficial similarities. Totalitarian regimes, like democracies, claimed to rule on behalf of the governed. They had elections or at least plebiscites (in the case of Nazi Germany). Both systems even had constitutions. The similarities, however, are far more apparent than real. Totalitarian regimes were ultrapaternalistic. *They* decided what was in the best interest of their citizens, not the citi-