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# The Totalitarian Temptation

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Liberalism's Enemies,  
Then and Now

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*The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*

BY VLADIMIR TISMANEANU.

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336 pp. \$34.95.

One evening in June 1940, an excited crowd in Berlin awaited Adolf Hitler's arrival at the opera. The German army was scoring victory after victory in Europe at the time, and when the dictator finally entered the room, the audience greeted him with impassioned cries of "Sieg Heil!" "Heil Hitler!" and "Heil Führer!" With the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact still in force, one of the attendees that night was Valentin Berezhkov, an interpreter for Stalin. "As I am watching all that," he recalled in his memoirs, "I am thinking to myself—and the thought scares me—how much there is in common between this and our congresses and conferences when Stalin makes his entry into the hall. The same thunderous,

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never-ending standing ovation. Almost the same hysterical shouts of 'Glory to Stalin!' 'Glory to our leader!'"

The parallels between communism and fascism have often been noted, fueling endless debates over whether the movements were fundamentally similar or different. *The Devil in History*, a new book by the political scientist Vladimir Tismaneanu, presents a genuinely fresh perspective on this topic, drawing enduring lessons from the last century's horrifying experiments with totalitarianism.

Instead of writing a historical treatise, Tismaneanu set out to produce "a political-philosophical interpretation of how maximalist utopian aspirations can lead to the nightmares of Soviet and Nazi camps epitomized by Kolyma and Auschwitz." Prompted by the author's personal intellectual journey, the book is an extended essay that examines the evolving interpretations of communism and fascism.

Tismaneanu touches on so many questions that he cannot possibly provide all the answers. But in doing so, he reinvigorates important debates about not only past ideologies but also present and future ones. The animus toward modern liberalism that he finds at the root of both earlier totalitarian movements has not disappeared, and the liberal world today should remain alert to its contemporary manifestations.

## WHERE LEFT MEETS RIGHT

Many intellectuals who spent much of their lives behind the Iron Curtain ended up believing that communism and fascism were basically alike. After beginning his postwar career as a member of Poland's Communist Party, for example, the

philosopher Leszek Kolakowski emigrated to the West in 1968. He eventually became convinced that all movements proclaiming utopian visions, including communism, were incorrigibly evil. Kolakowski's rationale was straightforward: the problem with such ideologies was that they grounded their legitimacy in claims to own the definition of "truth," and as Kolakowski explained, "If you oppose such a state or a system, you are an enemy of truth." Under communism, those enemies were primarily defined by class; under fascism, they were usually defined by race. But in both cases, the upshot was the same: the state must ruthlessly eliminate its ideological opponents, along with anyone deemed sympathetic to them in either thought or deed. The infinite elasticity of the categorization of enemies accounted for the mass murders under both systems.

Tismaneanu's gradual disillusionment with communism closely mirrored that of Kolakowski, whom Tismaneanu considers one of his intellectual godfathers. Even the denser passages of Tismaneanu's writing on political theory are infused with the passion of someone who has lived and breathed his subject. His parents, committed Romanian Communists, fought alongside the antifascist International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. But as a teenager living under the strictures of 1960s-era Romanian communism, Tismaneanu started seeing his country's political system for what it was, and he began furiously reading forbidden books by writers such as Kolakowski, the Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas, and the French philosopher and journalist Raymond Aron. "Confronted with the grotesque follies of Nicolae Ceausescu's

dynastic Communism," Tismaneanu explains, "I realized that I was living in a totalitarian regime run by a delusional leader." After his father's death, in 1981, the 30-year-old Tismaneanu took advantage of a trip with his mother to old battle sites in Spain to flee his native land.

The public disenchantment of so many intellectuals notwithstanding, many Westerners continue to operate under the assumption that communism was not nearly as horrific as fascism. Anyone who has walked the streets of Prague, Budapest, or Moscow in recent years has seen Western tourists eagerly snapping up souvenirs of the old regime. The same people who find the Nazi swastika repulsive are happy to wear the hammer and sickle on a T-shirt, hat, or military belt buckle. Having experienced communism firsthand, eastern Europeans are typically more hesitant to whitewash its record. But still, many took a long time to break with Marxist ideas and resisted the notion of directly equating the two totalitarian ideologies.

Tismaneanu explains the lengthy history of denial about the full dimensions of communism's crimes by highlighting how its leaders and theoreticians posed "as progressive, anti-imperialist, and, more important still, anti-Fascist." Although the philosophy they espoused was fundamentally flawed—and ultimately an excuse for the destruction of independent thinking—it pretended to be humane, sacrificing the individual for the good of the masses. And so for decades, even after the purging, starvation, and execution of millions, otherwise intelligent people continued to apologize for Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

Communism's seemingly coherent doctrine helps account for the reluctance

of many on the left to abandon their fascination with its utopian ideals. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the majority of leftist intellectuals began accepting that communism was irreparably defective. The year 1968 was a watershed, when Poland's communist regime suppressed a wave of student protests and the Kremlin ordered tanks into Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring reformers, who were attempting to introduce "socialism with a human face." As Tismaneanu points out, "The movement of 1968 was a blessing in disguise because through its failures it revitalized liberalism." By the mid-1980s, the belief that communism could be reformed was largely discredited. "What is the relationship between democracy and democratic socialism?" members of the Polish Solidarity movement jokingly asked. "The same as between a chair and an electric chair."

Nazism, in contrast, attracted some admiration from abroad in the 1930s, when Hitler seemed to be performing economic miracles and restoring Germany to strength and prominence, but any broader sympathy evaporated as the heinousness of the Nazis' crimes quickly came to light. The main reason for this was that unlike communism, Nazism was devoid of intellectual content. Communists may have deified their leaders, but they also possessed a well-established ideology; the Nazis only had *der Führer*, whose personal appeal did not survive his death.

To be sure, Hitler's party was supposedly rooted in a set of political ideas, but as Tismaneanu points out, "It would be impossible to speak seriously about Nazi philosophy." The pretense of a coherent ideology was easy to expose.

The American foreign correspondent Dorothy Thompson completely misjudged Hitler's political prospects when she interviewed him in November 1931, but she did get one thing right: "Take the Jews out of Hitler's program, and the whole thing . . . collapses." Without anti-Semitism, the Nazis had nothing to justify their existence.

### GOODBYE, LENIN

The major exception to the trend of increasing disillusionment with communism was in the Kremlin itself, where in the late 1980s, the group surrounding the newly installed general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, still believed that salvation could come through reform. This belief would soon prove illusory, but it played a crucial role in encouraging Gorbachev to tolerate more dissent than any of his predecessors. Through his ill-fated efforts to repair an ultimately doomed system, Gorbachev unwittingly provided the political space necessary for full-throated opposition forces to gain strength across the disintegrating Soviet empire.

These opposition movements shared one common goal: exposing the fallacies of the communist perversion of truth. It was a commitment, as a slogan from the Polish Solidarity movement put it, to affirming that "two plus two always equals four." In his seminal 1979 essay "The Power of the Powerless," the Czech dissident Václav Havel had argued that there was no more potent example of dissent than ordinary citizens refusing to participate in empty rituals and summoning the courage to speak honestly about both the present and the past. Central to such efforts to "live in truth," as Havel termed it, was debunking the myth

of a pure Leninism—the notion that Stalin had hijacked and deformed an essentially decent movement. This was the line put forward by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in his so-called secret speech, delivered to a closed session of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956. Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes and his “cult of personality” but maintained that these were the product of one man’s despotism, not the natural outgrowth of a fundamentally flawed system.

During the 1980s, however, more and more opponents of Soviet rule became convinced that Lenin was just as culpable as Stalin. “The problem with Leninism,” Tismaneanu explains, “was the sanctification of the ultimate ends, and thus the creation of an amoral universe in which the most terrible crimes could be justified in the name of a radiant future.” That universe found its most horrific expression under Stalin, but it existed under Lenin, too; there was a continuity between the Soviet Union’s first two leaders, not a divergence.

A comparable amoral universe, of course, existed under Hitler. Indeed, the Nazi dictator freely admitted that he had learned from Bolshevik methods. This resemblance underpins Tismaneanu’s most valuable conclusion: that more important than the battles between communism and Nazism were “their joint offensives against liberal modernity.” The Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact should not have shocked the West as much as it did. Even rhetorically, communism and fascism were alike in their disdain for tendencies considered decadent and bourgeois, such as the belief in democratic values, fair elections, and personal freedoms.

In order to fulfill their messianic missions, both movements insisted that the individual serve the state, the ruler, and the ideology—and nothing else. In this context, individual thought, or any notion of personal conscience, became subversive by definition. It is this common denominator that explains the similar roads to Kolyma and Auschwitz. To be sure, in their emphasis on mass production, both systems were modern; but when it came to how they treated their people, they were both worse than medieval.

### **FREEDOM FIGHTING**

No threats exist today on the scale of the two totalitarian behemoths of the last century. But there are still plenty of forces planning new offensives against liberal modernity, often invoking all-too-familiar conspiracy theories to justify the destruction of their enemies. Foremost among liberalism's adversaries today are terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and the Taliban, which claim, like the Nazis and the Soviets before them, that the path to purification is through unlimited violence. The key lesson of the last century, as spelled out by Tismaneanu, is the need to combat all movements that "dictate that followers renounce their critical faculties to embrace a pseudo-miraculous, . . . delusional vision of mandatory happiness."

Another central lesson is that the defenders of liberalism must constantly demonstrate the courage of their convictions. Just as the results of the last century's struggles were far from inevitable, there is nothing preordained about the outcome of the current struggles against radical movements, whatever ideological or pseudo-religious guise

they might assume. "The future is always pregnant with more than one alternative," Tismaneanu observes. "In other words, there is no ironclad determinism governing mankind's history."

Chance plays a role, of course: had Hitler been shot to death during the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, for example, instead of the companion with whom he was marching arm in arm, the Nazis would likely have never risen to power. But just as it has in the past, the future of freedom will depend on the kind of determination demonstrated by those who challenged the communist regimes in eastern Europe, even when the odds looked hopelessly long. And liberalism will forever be threatened by the type of abdication of moral duty visible in the West's appeasement of Hitler after his early acts of aggression.

Political systems built on the principles of democratic participation, tolerance, and individual rights will always face challenges, and their supporters can never become complacent. The twentieth century's most enduring lesson is that the defenders of liberalism cannot waver in their commitment to these ideals, even if the cost of protecting them is extremely high. 🌐