

Tyrants

A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror

WALLER R. NEWELL



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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> v
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: The Strange Career of Tyranny	i
<i>The Three Faces of Tyranny</i>	3
<i>The Ancient and Modern Understandings of Tyranny</i>	5
<i>Tyrants in Waiting: Terrorism and the Righteous Anger of Young Men</i>	8
<i>The Beautification of Violence</i>	12
<i>The Challenge of Tyranny in Today's World</i>	13
Part One: The Rage of Achilles: From Homeric Heroes to Lord and God of the World	18
<i>Homeric Kings and Heroes</i>	21
<i>Kings of the World: Universal Monarchy</i>	27
<i>Tyranny or Republic? The Emergence of the West</i>	35
<i>The Greatest Republic</i>	54
<i>The Universal Landlord: From Republic to Empire</i>	61
Part Two: City of God or City of Man? The Tyrant as Modern State Builder	71
<i>The Fall of the West</i>	78
<i>Feudal Monarchy and the Great Chain of Being</i>	83
<i>God's Shadow on Earth: The Ottoman Caliphate</i>	87
<i>Princes and Peoples: The Rebirth of the West</i>	94
<i>By God and My Right: Those Fascinating Tudors</i>	101
<i>The Tyrant as State Builder Lives On: Benevolent Despotism</i>	119
	iii

Part Three: The Eagles Will Drop Dead from the Skies:	
Millenarian Tyranny from Robespierre to Al Qaeda	133
<i>The Natural Condition of Man: Rousseau's Murderous Dream</i>	136
<i>Robespierre and the Algebra of Mass Murder</i>	140
<i>The Hallmarks of Millenarian Tyranny</i>	143
<i>The Time of the Great Noon: Millenarian Revolution</i>	
<i>Goes Underground</i>	152
<i>No Second Thermidor: Millenarian Tyranny Returns</i>	161
<i>The Number-One Leninist</i>	165
<i>The National Socialist World Blessing</i>	170
<i>The Führer</i>	177
<i>From National Socialism to Third-World Socialism to</i>	
<i>the International Jihad</i>	187
<i>The Tyrannical Personality</i>	191
<i>Millenarian Tyranny Today</i>	195
<i>A Worldwide Caliphate: Jihadism's Utopian Vision</i>	199
<i>The Nuclear Republic of God</i>	201
<i>Terrorism Is a Means to an End: Revolutionary Utopia</i>	208
Conclusion: How Democracy Can Win	211
<i>All Aboard for the Tyranny Tour</i>	211
<i>Vladimir Putin: Reformer and Kleptocrat with a Dash</i>	
<i>of the Millenarian</i>	213
<i>The Tour Continues: Democracy and the Tyrannical Temptation</i>	217
<i>What Should the West Do?</i>	221
<i>The Frontiers of Twenty-First Century Revolution</i>	226
<i>A Homeopathic Cure for the Tyrannical Temptation</i>	229
Reading for Further Interest	233
Index	241

Preface

When Russian President Vladimir Putin orchestrated an invasion of the Crimea, in violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine to which the Russian government itself had been a signatory, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry remarked in some bewilderment that Putin, with his aggressive militarism, seemed like a figure out of “the nineteenth century.”

If you agree with that, you should probably stop reading this book right now. After all, won’t the progress of history take care of retrograde adventurers like Putin? He can’t be more than a brief detour on our way to the spread of democracy around the world and the end of aggression.

If, on the other hand, you believe, like me, that Vladimir Putin is a figure from *every* century, then read on. Because this is a book about how and why tyranny is a permanent feature on the human landscape. It’s about the kind of tyrannical governments that have existed throughout history and still do today – some since ancient times, some specifically connected to the modern age. It follows the strange career of tyranny from its origins in ancient Greece and Rome to the state-building despots who brought Europe out of feudalism into the modern age. Finally, it explains the totalitarian tyrannies that began with the Jacobin Terror of 1793 and continued through the Bolsheviks, Nazis, Chairman Mao, the Khmer Rouge, and today’s Jihadists.

This book is also about the often twisted psychological makeup of tyrants, including those who aspire to become tyrants, namely terrorists. For terrorists, as we’ll see, are tyrants in waiting, and tyrannies, once established, continue to terrorize their captive subjects. Finally, it’s about the ways in which tyrants can attract rapt and devoted followers to carry out their murderous agenda.

If you find these topics interesting – and above all, necessary for informed citizens who want to protect and promote democracy – then this book is for you. It’s not about every form of injustice of which man is capable. Its focus is

mainly on the West. But it is based on the belief that tyranny is a permanent alternative in human affairs and in explaining political action.

The progress of history, if that has actually taken place, has plainly not gotten rid of tyranny. The genocidal horrors of the last century's totalitarianism are surely proof of that, along with today's aspirants to a worldwide Caliphate, such as ISIS. Believing in the progress of history may actually, as we'll see, contribute to the spread of tyranny itself. Not only because it lulls us into thinking that tyranny is fading away, but because all of the worst totalitarian regimes, after all, have claimed that they were on the *side* of history, bringing a better world for us all in the future through mass murder and conquest in the present.

Across the world today, we are witnessing both a heroic struggle for democracy and the disturbing strength of tyrannical regimes and movements. Whether it is the Syrian civil war, Putin's aggression, or the threat of ISIS, democracy and tyranny often appear to be in a dead heat. While American forces are now engaged against Jihadism in Iraq, self-identified Muslim terrorists inspired by our enemies there conduct brutal attacks on America's own soil. Why is this happening now? How should the West respond? What are the lessons of history?

The spirit of free self-government has triumphed over tyranny again and again, from Marathon and Salamis to Waterloo, Dunkirk, D-Day, Solidarity, and Operation Desert Storm, but democracies seem to undergo periodic bouts of amnesia, unable to identify tyranny for what it is.

I hope this book will help provide a cure for that amnesia. Democracy is a better idea than tyranny on every level, and in a fair fight it almost never loses. But to defend that idea and make it successful, we need to be aware of its greatest and most resilient enemy – tyranny.

Acknowledgments

A year as Visiting Fellow in Humanistic Studies at the Beverley Rogers, Carol C. Harter Black Mountain Institute, the University of Nevada Las Vegas gave me the opportunity to complete this book free of my normal academic duties, for which I am most grateful. A public lecture for the Black Mountain Institute gave me the opportunity to preview Part Three of this book before an appreciative audience. Thanks are due as well to the Heritage Foundation, and particularly to David Azerad and Arthur Milikh, for enabling me to present the overall themes of the book at a public lecture in Washington, and to explore them further in an essay for their journal *First Principles*.

A long-standing group of former teachers and current colleagues, all friends as well, and from many walks of life besides the academic, has sustained me throughout this book, as it has through my earlier books. Even when I don't see them for a while, I frequently imagine them reacting to what I write and hope they approve. They include, in no special order, Thomas and Lorraine Pangle, Harvey Mansfield, Lynette Mitchell, Charles Fairbanks, Robert Goldberg, Leah Bradshaw, Catherine and Michael Zuckert, Peter Ahrens Dorf, Stephen Smith, Norman and Karen Doidge, Gary Clewley, Paul Rahe, Clifford Orwin, Ryan Balot, Barry Strauss, George Jonas, Gerald Owen, Robert Sibley, Ken Green, Mark Lutz, David Fott, along with my Carleton colleagues Tom Darby, Farhang Rajaei, and Geoffrey Kellow, and former students of mine who are making their way into the academic world, including Alex Duff and Matthew Post.

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