Introduction

The regimes and their dictators: perspectives of comparison
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The need to compare

The starting-point of comparative history is invariably the impression, realisation, or certainty that two (or more) societies have sufficient in common to invite – even demand – analysing them as a part of a single set of questions. Normally, it is a problem common to both societies or the historical interaction of those societies which prompts recourse to the comparative method.

Alongside the many exhortations to undertake comparative analysis are the many warnings of its pitfalls. A conventional theoretical objection to comparison is embodied in the claim that historical knowledge is derived from unique, non-repeatable events – in contrast to those fields of knowledge which relate to phenomena capable of repeating themselves, about which generalisations can be drawn and conceptual constructs erected. However, the dichotomy is a false one. The categories are not mutually exclusive. Each individual, for instance, has a unique personality. But we do not presume that the uniqueness of the individual prevents us from comparing individuals, using concepts like ‘humanity’, or generalising about ‘society’ and the ‘systems’ or ‘structures’ underpinning that society. For societies are not simply agglomerates of individuals. They could not exist, and could not have existed in the past, without creating and recreating discernible patterns allowing that modicum of predictability without which human activity would be impossible. For this to be so, individual ‘personality’, though unique, has also to be seen as a social product. And once this is admitted, we can theorise and we can and should compare. In fact, it is self-evident that only comparison allows an understanding of uniqueness. Nietzsche’s conclusion that ‘only things without a history are definable’ could be stood on its head: in human

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, Use and Abuse of History (Indianapolis–New York 1959), pp. 59, 61, 70.
affairs only entities with a history are subject to theorisation, and are thus definable.

In some senses, all historical enquiry is comparative, even if unwittingly so. Like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain, who did not know that he was using prose, we engage in comparison without always realising it. The study of lengthy stretches of history even of a single country, for example, involves a comparison of different periods in the past. Equally, any study of extensive geographical areas (such as Western Europe) or deployment of concepts in historical explanation (for example, capitalism, or nationalism) is by definition comparative, even if this is not always claimed or even realised. By contrast, some studies purporting to be comparative are in reality describing separate histories in parallel. In other cases, historians might claim similarities for phenomena whose superficial likeness is deceptive on account of the greatly differing historical environment in which the phenomena occurred. In any case, the obvious point needs to be reiterated: comparison does not consist of seeking similarity. It is at least equally important to seek out and explain fundamental differences, to understand not just what common ground there might be between the societies or systems compared, but also their specific and unique features. To keep these aims in view requires constant questioning of the validity of the comparison, and of the historical method deployed to explore it. No patent or ready-made methodology is to hand. Comparison is fraught with difficulties. But not to compare leaves us blind to the past – and to the past’s implications for the present and future. For knowing just one society may often amount to a poor understanding of even that single society.

One way of approaching the past of the two countries examined in this volume has proved influential, but contains a fallacy which is not immediately evident. Seeking to explain the respective ‘anomalies’ of the historical development of Germany and Russia, some scholars have turned to liberal-bourgeois western societies and their political systems as a model and blueprint. The absence of such a development has then been taken to explain the growth of National Socialism in the one case, Leninism and Stalinism in the other. Looking to ‘the West’ and the mechanisms of its political and social development as the paradigm seemed to offer the key to what was missing east of the Rhine. As critics, particularly specialists on Germany, have said, it sometimes amounted to studying what did not happen, rather than what actually did take place.2 The French ethnographer and political sociologist Pierre Clastres thought this a more broadly shared fallacy among social scientists. He

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complained that in some studies of ‘primitive societies’, such societies ‘were determined negatively, under the guise of what was missing’, allowing them to be portrayed as societies without states, without literacy, and without history, incapable of creating a market or acquiring surpluses, and thereby of developing into ‘advanced’ societies. This ‘ethnocentric’ approach, positing an inexorable evolution (or prevention of such an evolution), hindered real understanding of these societies. Moreover, the evolutionary determinism of such ‘ethnocentrism’ is of self-evidently limited value if two societies within a specific socio-economic system followed quite different paths. Deducing Nazism and Stalinism from the failure of Germany and Russia to develop like Britain raises the obvious objection: not every country with weak capitalism (even in the absence of parliamentary government) produced an equivalent of Stalinism; not every country with a vibrant capitalist system (even where authoritarian structures of rule prevailed) engendered an equivalent of Nazism. Once the ‘ethnocentric’ fallacy is avoided, however, comparison – including comparison with the West – is often illuminating.

Even so the question arises: why compare countries with such different history, geography, social structures, and levels of development as Germany and Russia (subsequently the Soviet Union)? The framework we have imposed upon this volume suggests three strands of an answer, though these are certainly not the only possibilities.

One reason is certainly that for much of this century Germany under Nazi rule and the Soviet Union have been openly compared, by bracketing them together through the concept of ‘totalitarianism’ – a comparative concept par excellence. Here we had comparison with a vengeance, positing a high degree of similarity between two different, and opposed, systems of rule. (This is itself somewhat unusual, since comparative political science tends to look for affinities rather than opposites, for groups of intrinsically similar systems, such as liberal democracies, or fascist regimes.) Criticism by many scholars about the usability of the concept in comparative analysis, and about the superficiality of the purported similarities of the two supposed ‘totalitarian states’, has not dented the continued, in recent years even strengthened, usage of the term both in common parlance and in academic analysis.

Above all, it was the way in which the totalitarianism concept was used as an ideological tool in the service of the Cold War – often distorting reality and intellectually dishonest – which disqualified it in the eyes of numerous scholars. Indeed, the comparison did often contain all too obvious ideological or propagandistic aims. By claiming

an essential ‘sameness’ between Nazism and Stalinism, though they had been in mortal combat with each other, it used the evils of the dead Hitler regime to condemn the Soviet system which was still very much alive. However, the ideological abuse of a comparative concept does not in itself invalidate genuine historical comparison. Scholarly analysis of comparative fascism, for example, has never been regarded as invalid – though some dispute the applicability of the term ‘fascism’ to German National Socialism – despite the fact that the concept of ‘fascism’ has been at least as commonly abused as ‘totalitarianism’ for propagandist and ideological purposes.

Another objection was that Stalinism and Nazism were wholly different phenomena, arising from totally different types of society, thereby rendering comparison obtuse. Like had to be compared with like, the argument ran; to compare fundamentally dissimilar societies and systems was futile. This objection, it will be noted, is based upon an a priori determination of dissimilarity. It is, of course, impossible to evaluate the extent of difference, or of similarity, without comparison. It is as well, therefore, to make such a comparison explicit.

When comparison is a method of scholarly enquiry, not of propaganda, there can be no logical objection to it, even if the conclusions emphasise differences more than similarities. Comparative analysis welcomes both sameness and difference. It can work with nuances of analogy, parallelism, identity, and polarity. In two different societies, or even in two very different periods in the history of one society, nothing is ever actually very similar, let alone identical. That does not invalidate comparison. Comparing two societies demands the search for the ‘specific’ in each case, while acknowledging the common features when and if they can be ascertained.

In fact, looking for ‘common ground’ is more fruitful than the search for ‘sameness’. After all, very different species can form part of the same genus. Elements of the historical development of the two countries which are our concern here also speak in favour of the ‘common ground’ approach, even where the differences and contrasts are obvious. Before the First World War, both countries had authoritarian monarchies, which were forced into concessions to parliamentarism (of an extremely curtailed kind in the Russian case). Both had powerful bureaucracies, and strong military traditions. Both possessed powerful landowning classes, but also experienced strong economic modernising drives and rapid industrialisation (intense, if geographically very circumscribed, in Russia). Both countries were expansionist powers with imperialist ambitions, in which the contested territories of central and eastern Europe figured prominently. The countries clashed militarily in the First World War, but both felt the trauma of defeat and
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revolution (if of very different kinds). Germany went on to experience what has been described as a fourteen-year 'latent civil war'4 (in which the 'model' of the Soviet Union posed as a bogey figure in the intensifying ideological confrontation of bolshevism versus nationalism). Russia’s experience was of a near-genocidal actual civil war of the utmost brutality, leaving behind a baleful legacy. Alongside the fragile pluralism of Weimar democracy, eventually collapsing to open the door to the Hitler dictatorship, it is even possible to see a form of 'authoritarian pluralism' during the 1920s, when Soviet Russia conducted the so-called New Economic Policy (often abbreviated as NEP), before this gave way to Stalin’s dictatorship.

The ‘common ground’ approach, based upon recognition of crucial differences, offers pointers towards explaining how such easily equated dictatorships, though fundamentally different in so many respects, were produced almost simultaneously in countries with sharply contrasting profiles. Multi-layered systemic crisis is certainly a key element. It helps, too, in focusing attention on the historical background to the acute ideological struggle of the two regimes during the 1930s and to the titanic clash of the Nazi and Stalinist systems during the Second World War, which forms the second strand of our volume. In 1941, lines of historical development which had mainly seemed to run parallel to each other converged and clashed with the utmost violence. The extremity of clashes in war offers the most direct comparison of all.

The Second World War determined, of course, the total eradication of one of the dictatorships, while the other, following the death of Stalin, attempted to distance itself from the atrocities of his regime and, partially metamorphosised, lived on for almost four decades. During this time the existence of the German Democratic Republic, the most loyal Soviet satellite, was the clearest expression of the continued intertwined histories of Germany and the Soviet Union.

The end of the Soviet system has revealed in all openness a trait largely concealed, despite Krushchev’s famous denunciation of 1956, before the Gorbachev era: the problem of confronting the Stalinist past. This parallels the continuing problem in Germany of coming to terms with the Nazi past, and of locating the past in a wider German historically-shaped identity. It is a problem acutely felt since 1945, one that came into full focus in the Fischer controversy of the 1960s and especially the Historikerstreit of the 1980s, and resurfaced once more in the aftermath of Unification. This further common ground for a comparison between the two countries forms the third strand of enquiry in this volume.

4 The term is Richard Bessel’s. See his Germany after the First World War (Oxford 1993), p. 262.
The national debates about the fate and identity of the respective countries are invitations to compare those very debates. For ‘facing the past’ involves, in these cases, questioning identities with roots extending beyond the era of the two dictatorships themselves. They are questions with deep political and ideological implications, as is made evident in the analyses offered in this section of the volume. This can, perhaps, be most vividly illustrated by a further example, drawn from an area which is not part of the sustained comparison offered in the contributions which follow: the denial of the Holocaust.

The perversity of the denial that the Holocaust actually happened has psychological underpinnings that echo the perversity of mind of the Nazi perpetrators themselves. Implied by the denial is that the Jews themselves invented the horror stories of the death-camps. Thus the victims are once more vilified as the perpetrators are exonerated. While some of those swallowing the denial claims might – charitably – be regarded as no more than naive, the main promoters of such ideas cannot but be well aware of what the Nazis did to the Jews, and must even approve of their actions. They share the antisemitic fury of the Nazis themselves, illustrated by the lengths to which they are prepared to go to revile Jews by attempting to turn the Jewish tragedy into a Jewish invention.

An attenuated or ‘indirect’ version of the Holocaust-denial occurred in the Soviet Union with the suppression by the Stalinist regime – and for some time under Stalin’s successors – of information on the destruction of the Jews in the Ukraine. Though the Soviet regime had not itself perpetrated the killing of the Ukrainian Jews, the slaughter had involved the active participation of many local pro-Nazi collaborators. And it had probably met with tacit acquiescence among broader strata resting on support and connivance to be found in the deeply chauvinistic and antisemitic atmosphere permeating influential party circles under, and after, Stalin. The conspiracy of official silence was only broken by Yevtushenko’s courageous poem Babij Yar – dealing with the notorious massacre of 33,371 Jews on 29–30 September 1941. The poem was later set to music by Shostakovich and performed in concert halls.5

The distortion of history in the attempt to salvage historical identity is seldom as crude as in the Holocaust denial stories. But parallels exist in both countries of the misuse of comparison for such purposes. An example is provided by one strand of the Historikerstreit in Germany in the mid-1980s, depicting Nazi racial genocide as the reaction to the earlier

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'class genocide' of the Bolsheviks. In attributing prime guilt to Soviet Communism – still a going concern at the time – this interpretation overlooked the evidence in Hitler's own early writings and speeches. This indicated that anti-bolshevism was a later insertion into an already present virulent, latently genocidal anti-Jewish myth which had been prevalent on the völkisch Right long before the Russian Revolution, and long before Hitler's entry into the political arena. Hitler's own antisemitic prejudices were probably formed, or accentuated, during his time in pre-war Vienna, as he claimed in Mein Kampf. But the first clear evidence that whatever feelings he had about the Jews had been 'rationalised' into an antisemitic ideology dates from September 1919. Strikingly, this first antisemitic statement, concluding that the final aim of antisemitism must be 'the uncompromising removal of Jews altogether', does not mention Bolshevism or Russia. Anti-capitalism à la Gottfried Feder, not anti-Bolshevism, was the basis of this and Hitler's other early attacks on the Jews, portrayed as racketeers, war profiteers, speculators, and exploiters of 'interest slavery'. Anti-bolshevism was only included in the armoury some months later, around April 1920. It was summer 1920 before it became a frequent vehicle for his anti-Jewish tirades. It gave Hitler a further propaganda weapon. And it provided him with yet greater certainty in the correctness of his 'world view'. But it did not cause that intrinsically genocidal 'world view' in the first place.

In the Soviet case, many defenders of Stalinism, from the beginnings of perestroika, either denied that gross atrocities had taken place or continued to voice the view advanced by the regime at the time that those arrested and executed under Stalin were indeed traitors and enemies of the country, who had deserved their punishment. A rich crop of such statements, which, in addition, accused the critics of denying the Stalinist regime's enormous achievements and, above all, its victory over the Nazis to save humanity from slavery, could still be found in the post-Soviet press. Unlike the German attempt to salvage the past by eliding Hitler from it as a kind of aberration produced by an understandable response to a worse evil in Soviet Communism, the Russian apologists amounted to an attempt to save the past by rehabilitating Stalin.

7 Hitler's antisemitic rantings in his early speeches drew eclectically on a variety of tracts by well-known anti-Jewish writers, including Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Adolf Wahrmund, and, especially, Theodor Fritzsch. All of course, pre-dated anti-Bolshevism. See Reginald Phelps, 'Hitler's "grundlegende" Rede über den Antisemitismus', Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 16 (1968), pp. 390-420, here esp. pp. 395-9.
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A final example of politically motivated distortions of comparison in the continuing reappraisal of the recent past of both countries returns us to the Holocaust and what one might call the ‘atrocities toll’ of each regime. Not only German nationalists and apologists for Nazism, but also vehemently anti-communist Russian nationalists, emphasise the extent of Stalinist terror, the one tendency in order to point out that Stalin claimed even more victims than Hitler (as if that excused anything in the horrors perpetrated by Nazism), the other to appropriate to Stalinism genocide of a comparable or even worse kind than that of the Nazis in order to stress the evil they see embodied in Communism itself.

Stalinist terror does not need to be played down to underline the uniqueness of the Holocaust – the only example which history offers to date of a deliberate policy aimed at the total physical destruction of every member of an ethnic group. There was no equivalent of this under Stalinism. Though the waves of terror were massive indeed, and the death-toll immense, no ethnic group was singled out for total physical annihilation. A particularly heavy toll among Stalin’s victims was, of course, exacted from the state and party apparatus.

The application of the term ‘Holocaust’ to the Stalinist system is inappropriate. The best way to reveal the pathology and inhumanity of Stalinism is by scholarly attention to the evidence, and not by abusing the methods of comparative history through the loose – and often far from innocent – misleading transplantation of terms imbued with deep historical significance.

II. Comparative approaches

As already noted, this volume makes no pretence at offering a systematic comparison of Stalinism and Nazism. It sets out to be suggestive, not definitive. It is, of necessity, rigorously selective in the themes chosen for comparison. For instance, we do not have a contribution – surprising as it might at first sight seem – which offers an explicit comparative analysis of terror in ‘the two great slaughterhouses of the twentieth century’ (Michael Geyer). Yet, implicitly, the terrorist aspect of the two regimes figures in almost every contribution. No other aspect of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes has been the subject of so many studies. Perhaps for this very reason, no paper specifically on terror was offered to the conference from which this volume emanates. Our volume in this important case, as in others, can offer pointers to a

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full-scale comparison. But it cannot provide the systematic comparison which still awaits its historian. Another crucial theme, comparison of the ‘war machines’ of the two regimes, is a parallel omission. The literature on the armed forces in each of the two countries is vast. But systematic comparison is hard to undertake and, as a result, is hard to find. We thought we had the prospect of such a comparison for this volume. But, ultimately, it did not materialise. What remains once more is a series of pointers towards a comparison – building bricks rather than the fabric itself. A third area where the gulf between the relative state of empirical research in Germany and in the former Soviet Union hinders what would be an important comparison is the impact of the regimes on attitudes and behavioural patterns of ‘ordinary’ citizens. Here, the volume is perhaps regrettably but necessarily one-sided. Germany is simply far better researched than is the Soviet Union under Stalin in this respect. The uneven historiographical base makes systematic comparison extremely difficult, if not at present impossible.

It would be expecting too much, therefore, to look to overt comparison in all or even in most of the papers of the volume. In more cases than not, analysis centres upon one or other of the regimes in question, though inviting in every case direct comparison with the counterpart regime. The eclectic approaches reflected in the volume are aimed in most cases at suggesting fruitful possibilities of comparison, rather than providing the finished product. This was also the aim of the conference underlying the volume: it saw itself as an experimental laboratory testing possible ground for comparison, rather than attempting to produce a refined product which the raw materials would not yet sustain. It is our hope that, on this basis, the papers presented on the three areas chosen make a collective contribution in providing just such raw materials out of which systematic comparison can begin to be constructed. One promising area of comparison is that of the leadership cult in the two regimes.

Both the Stalinist and the Nazi regimes represented a new genre of political system centred upon the artificial construct of a leadership cult – the ‘heroic myth’ of the ‘great leader’, no longer a king or emperor but a ‘man of the people’. The first section of the volume highlights similarities and differences in the menacing new cult-driven form of authoritarianism.

In the first essay in the volume Ronald Suny explores the basis of

Stalin’s personal autocracy, how he was able to sustain his authority. Though Suny does not explicitly deal with it, there is a resonance here of the ‘intentionalist’ versus ‘structuralist’ (or ‘functionalist’) debates about the role of Hitler in the National Socialist regime.11 Suny rejects an exclusive focus on terror and propaganda as the explanation of Stalin’s power, arguing that terror itself rested on widespread support and collaboration. He emphasises Stalin’s centralisation drive, and aim to monopolise decision-making, though demonstrates the practical effect this had of building up local power bases run by ‘little Stalins’. Concentration of power at the top thus led inevitably at the same time to its diffusion through a multiplicity of agents, dependent upon Stalin for their careers and even for their physical survival, and not surprisingly anxious to do his will. (There are parallels here to the readiness of Nazi functionaries to ‘second-guess’ Hitler and anticipate his presumed wishes, as emphasised in Kershaw’s essay below.)

Suny also points to the social groups who were on the receiving end of Stalin’s ‘Big Deal’, and wedded through material improvement to the ‘order created by Stalin’. He singles out ‘a new Soviet middle class . . . with its own form of “bourgeois values”’, ‘Stakhanovite workers, with their newly acquired bicycles and wristwatches, . . . factory managers and their wives’. For there is no doubt, in Suny’s view, that Stalin did create ‘Stalinism’, that his personal role was crucial. The functionalist argument for Suny – and here there are clear parallels to the German debates – reaches only so far, as he points out in the context of the debates among Soviet specialists on the causes of Stalinist terror: ‘neither arguments from social context nor functionalist deductions from effects to causes have successfully eliminated the principal catalyst to the Terror, the will and ambition of Stalin’.

One of the most important features of the Soviet system was its bureaucratic character. This can be seen as one reflection of what Trotsky (reformulating Marx’s concept of ‘uneven development’) called ‘combined development’ – the merging of the most modern with the most archaic traits in systems attempting rapid modernisation.12 By the end of the Civil War a huge, ‘pre-modern’ peasantry was ruled over by a new, centralised state with the full command of whatever modern means of control and administration were available. The potential was provided, therefore, for a rapid expansion of ‘statism’. In what came to be known as ‘the Stalin Revolution’, the state monopoly, especially with

11 Ian Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation (3rd edn, London 1993), offers an evaluation of these debates.
12 Leon Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution (1st edn 1932; New York 1980), pp. 3–15. Trotsky did not try to apply this to Stalin’s Russia, probably because Stalinism was insufficiently crystallised at the time he was writing in 1930.