

I

Introduction: Intellectuals and Politics

Politics in a dictatorship begins in the personality of the dictator.

*Li Zhisui*¹

Distinguished intellectuals, gifted poets, and influential journalists summoned their talents to convince all who would listen that modern tyrants were liberators and that their unconscionable crimes were noble, when seen in the proper perspective.

*Mark Lilla*²

One of the most perplexing attachments to be found among proponents of the high cause of liberty, humanity and a new world of peace, justice and love, is the admiration of absolute power and grandeur in the shape of the leader, hero, or conqueror.

*Renee Winegarten*³

The personality of the leader matters far more in a dictatorship than in a democracy. Unencumbered by the constraints of institutions, legal norms, and public opinion, the dictator's personality exerts much greater influence on the exercise of power than that of elected leaders. In this study attention will be paid both to the actual personality of the dictators

¹ Li Zhisui: *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*, New York 1994, x.

² Mark Lilla: *Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, New York 2001, 198. Lilla also wrote: "As Continental Europe gave birth to two great tyrannical systems ... communism and fascism, it also gave birth to a new social type, for which we need a new name: the philyrannical intellectual ... What is it about the human mind that made the intellectual defense of tyranny possible in the twentieth century? (Ibid., 197–198.)"

³ Renee Winegarten: *Writers and Revolution: The Fatal Lure of Action*, New York 1974, 99.

(insofar as evidence permits) and their images, or perceptions, and especially the positive impression they made on many Western intellectuals.

There is considerable evidence (presented below) indicating that many well-known twentieth-century intellectuals admired dictators of various ideological persuasion, as well as the political system they represented. Such admiration, often merging into hero worship, was an integral part of a substantial body of political misjudgments.⁴ Misjudgments of this kind were not limited to intellectuals: artists, scientists, journalists, clergymen, businessmen, and politicians too were capable of making them. In the following I will make occasional reference to the latter as well, especially when their misjudgments were similar to those of the intellectuals.

The admiration of dictators and dictatorships was seamlessly integrated: the attractions of individual dictators were inseparable from the appeals of the social-political system they symbolized, and the pages that follow reflect this connection. I did not come across a single case of a political system that was found admirable, but not its leader, or conversely, reverence for the dictator unaccompanied by positive sentiments about the system.⁵

What Milovan Djilas, a leading Yugoslav communist functionary (and subsequently critic of the system), said of Stalin applies, in all probability, to other dictators as well, as discussed below, and accounts for their appeal: “He was the incarnation of an idea, transfigured ... into pure idea, and thereby into something infallible and sinless.”⁶ Most of the dictators possessed of such appeals were Fascist, Nazi, and Communist, and each made an indelible impact on the political movements and systems they represented. Francois Furet wrote: “Both Bolshevism and Fascism, as vast collective passions, were personified by personalities who were ... exceptional ... common to the three great dictatorships of the era was that each of their destinies was determined by the will of an individual.”⁷

Here the question may also be raised if there is anything we might learn from this study about dictators, as distinct from learning about the

⁴ For a book-length analysis of such misjudgments, see Paul Hollander: *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, New Brunswick NJ 1998 (first published by Oxford University Press, New York 1981).

⁵ A partial exception to this generalization may be found in discussions of the relationship between the Soviet system and the personality of Stalin. Following his death and the revelations of his misrule, some Western intellectuals (not unlike Khrushchev in his 1956 speech at the 20th Party Congress) sought to legitimate the Soviet system by ascribing all, or most, of its defects to the personality and flawed policies of Stalin, thus separating the leader from the system.

⁶ Milovan Djilas: *Conversations with Stalin*, New York 1962, 57.

⁷ Francois Furet: *The Passing of an Illusion*, Chicago 1999, 164–165.

Introduction

3

intellectuals who sympathized with them? Given the premise of this study, namely, that many intellectuals misperceived and misjudged the dictators, it would seem unlikely that we could learn much of interest or importance from their writings about the actual characteristics of dictators. Nevertheless, while we are likely to learn far more about the intellectuals from their attitudes toward dictators, we may also learn something about dictators from the same sources, despite their skewed aspects. Insofar as the dictators encouraged intellectuals (and others) to take a flattering view of them and basked in the official cults created by their institutions of propaganda, we might learn of their self-conceptions and the qualities they wished to propagate about themselves. If so, the dictators had *some* influence on the way they were seen by intellectuals.

To be sure, intellectuals and members of other elite groups are not the only people capable of admiring dictators; many dictators have been hugely popular with the ordinary people they ruled, at any rate for certain periods of time. As Ian Kershaw wrote, “the adulation of Hitler by millions of Germans ... meant that the person of the Führer ... formed a crucial integratory force in the Nazi system of rule.”⁸ Albert Speer too noted about Hitler’s popularity (also applicable to other charismatic dictators) that “the mass exultation was not called forth by rhetoric or suggestion, but solely by the effect of Hitler’s presence. Whereas individuals in the crowd were subject to this influence only for a few seconds at a time, Hitler himself was eternally exposed to the worship of the masses.”⁹ While this broader phenomenon is also a matter of great interest, the attitude of intellectuals is particularly intriguing and in need of explanation since, as most of us believe, dictators do not deserve admiration from any quarter, least of all by intellectuals. Dictators are justifiably seen as personifications of oppression, lawlessness, and a seemingly insatiable hunger for power and adulation. Insofar as they attain legitimacy and popularity, it is usually ascribed to their skill in deceiving their supporters, or the false consciousness of their subjects.

The relationship between dictators and intellectuals raises broader questions about politics and intellectuals that cannot be answered in isolation from the major political, historical, and cultural currents of the periods concerned,¹⁰ and without revisiting the conflicting conceptions of the nature of intellectuals.

⁸ Ian Kershaw: *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, Oxford, UK 1987, I.

⁹ Albert Speer: *Inside the Third Reich*, New York 1970, 48.

¹⁰ Joachim Fest wrote: “The weakness and readiness to capitulate [to dictators – P.H.] can be understood only against a background of ... the whole position and function of

REVISITING CONCEPTIONS OF INTELLECTUALS

It is both tempting and problematic to generalize about intellectuals and their political attitudes. The major source of information about these attitudes is their own writings and public statements since “intellectual” is not a category used in empirical opinion research.¹¹ Most people who may qualify as intellectuals have no occasion or reason to disclose their political beliefs and attitudes toward dictators and the political systems they represented. But there have been other intellectuals, much smaller in number, interested in, and drawn to, these political figures, who chose to write and make public statements about them. A few of them even met various dictators and exchanged ideas with them. The generalizations that follow are obviously limited to such intellectuals, many of whom used to be prominent and influential.

I had no intention or ability to prove that *most* intellectuals, or intellectuals in general, misjudge political matters and are inclined to revere, admire, or worship dictators. However, a substantial but undetermined portion of Western intellectuals did display such attitudes.

Conceptions of intellectuals may be divided between the favorable or idealized and the critical or skeptical. The former emphasize (as did Karl Mannheim) their supposed autonomy and commitment to the disinterested exploration and questioning of a wide range of ideas. Richard Hofstadter, who held this view, designated intellectuals as “special custodian[s] of values like reason and justice.”¹² Paul Baran advocated a similarly idealistic conception:

The desire to tell the truth is ... only one condition for being an intellectual. The other is courage, readiness to carry on rational inquiry to wherever it may lead ... An intellectual is thus in essence a *social critic*, a person whose concern

intellectuals in modern society, which ... explains the susceptibility of these classes to totalitarian solutions. Among these motivations are the ambivalent attitude of intellectuals to power and their tendency to embrace utopian systems or ideological concepts” (*The Face of the Third Reich*, New York 1970, 249).

¹¹ There are, however, surveys of the political attitudes of certain occupational categories (such as college teachers) that include many intellectuals and provide information about their political attitudes. In the United States such surveys consistently reflected a left-of-center disposition of the majority.

¹² Karl Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia*, New York 1936; Hofstadter quoted in Helena Rimon: “Paradoxes of ‘Free Floating’ and Controversy of Betrayal: Intellectuals’ Reflections on Themselves against a Background of Terror,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2013, 532.

Introduction

5

is ... to help overcome obstacles ... to the attainment of a better, more humane and more rational social order.¹³

Edward Said saw “the figure of the intellectual as a being set apart, someone able to speak the truth, a ... courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task.” In this exalted view, “the real, or ‘true’ intellectual is ... always an outsider, living in self-imposed seamlessly integrated exile on the margins of society.”¹⁴ Said himself was a university professor at Columbia University, author of many widely reviewed and highly praised books, many of them required reading in hundreds of college and university courses.¹⁵ Numerous books were written about him, courses on his ideas were offered at several universities, and he was a frequent guest on television talk shows and a popular speaker at professional meetings and on college campuses. Apparently all this was compatible with seeing himself as the true intellectual living on the margins of society.

The skeptical view of intellectuals emphasizes their lack of realism, propensity to abstract thinking, groundless generalization, a frustrated power-hunger, and an irresistible propensity to pontificate. The following summary characterization, *not* intended as criticism, captures some of these attributes: “Gramsci, like Lukacs is a man driven by the *dream* of totality, unity and coherence.”¹⁶ Notwithstanding the fuzziness of this dream (at any rate as summed up in the quotation), it can be readily associated with philosopher-kings, intent on creating social systems that will embody these dreams, whatever their exact nature.¹⁷

¹³ Baran cited in Rafael Rojas: *Fighting over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution*, Princeton NJ 2016, 105.

¹⁴ Said quoted in Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch eds.: *Intellectuals and Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie*, London 1997, 1–2. David Brooks commented on the “exalted view” of intellectuals “influenced by the Russian notion of the *intelligentsia*, a secular priesthood ... who participated in national life by living above it in a kind of universal space of truth and disinterestedness, rendering moral judgments on the activities below ... only by staying aloof from society that they could see it clearly and honestly, so they believed” (*Bobos in Paradise*, New York 2000, 143–144).

¹⁵ See Joshua Muravchik: *Making David into Goliath: How the World Turned Against Israel*, New York 2014, 99.

¹⁶ Neil Harding: “Intellectuals and Socialism,” in Jennings and Kemp-Welch eds., 208 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Tocqueville was probably the first to discern some of these defining characteristics of intellectuals: “Their very way of life led these writers to indulge in abstract theories and generalizations regarding the nature of government ... For living as they did, quite out of touch with practical politics, they lacked the experience which might have tempered their enthusiasms ... Thus ... there was gradually built up in men’s minds an imaginary

There is disagreement about the compatibility of being a true intellectual and a holder of power, given the likelihood that the possession of power and dispassionate truth-seeking are difficult to reconcile. Russell Berman wrote:

a certain enlightenment utopia imagined a world ruled by reason as a formula for universal peace and prosperity. Only the brightest ... could hold the reins of power, their intelligent schemes could banish the benighted habits of humanity ... Intellectuals, finding themselves at a distance from political centers, succumb to a will to power, a desire to control. Should they succeed, their effort to impose their plans on the social world often take a repressive turn.¹⁸

By many definitions Joseph Goebbels was an intellectual, or, as one author put it, “an intellectual among thugs.”¹⁹ He had a doctorate in literature and philosophy, writing his dissertation on German romantics; he was the author of books and plays before becoming the chief propagandist of Hitler. He had a consuming interest in ideas, and fully agreed with Lenin about using ideas as weapons. He was a dedicated moralizer and believer in a utopian social system of the future. We tend to recoil from thinking of him as an intellectual because he was powerful and a deeply committed supporter of the Nazi regime who inspired and devised many of its policies. It may be equally shocking for those who believe that higher education confers immunity against inhumane attitudes that the 1942 Wannsee Conference (devoted to planning the Final Solution, that is, the extermination of European Jews) “was attended primarily by people with academic titles; *two thirds had university degrees and over half bore the title of doctor, mainly of law.*”²⁰

There is no useful and widely agreed upon occupational definition of intellectuals, since they may be found in a variety of occupations that have something to do with the creation and dissemination of ideas.²¹ Being an intellectual is largely a matter of possessing certain attitudes, in

ideal society in which all was simple, uniform, coherent, equitable and rational” (Alexis de Tocqueville: *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Garden City NY 1955, 141, 147).

¹⁸ Russell Berman: “Intellectuals and Power,” *Telos*, Summer 2007.

¹⁹ Louis L. Snyder: *Hitler's Elite*, New York 1989, 99.

²⁰ Ivan Klima: *My Crazy Century*, New York 2013, 476. The data he quoted came from Mark Roseman: *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, New York 2004.

²¹ Thomas Sowell defines intellectuals as people “whose end products are ideas” and who create “a general set of presumptions, beliefs and imperatives – a vision that serves as a framework for the way particular issues and events ... are perceived by the population at large” (*Intellectuals and Society*, New York 2011, 503–504).

particular a social-critical disposition combined with a moralizing bent. The social-critical impulses of intellectuals are, as a rule, aimed at their own society and sometimes culminate in its wholesale rejection, in feelings of alienation. But the latter can be compatible with high levels of material comfort, security, and a respectable social status, at any rate in our times, and in pluralistic Western societies, as in the case of Edward Said. Reinhard Bendix observed that there is a “mismatch between their [the intellectuals’] comfortable life-style and their theoretically based despair ... public messages of despair are again and again sent ... by people living in relative comfort.”²²

A more devastating view of intellectuals (the intelligentsia of his times and country) was expressed by Anton Chekhov through one of his fictional characters:

The vast majority of the intelligentsia that I know don’t search for anything, don’t do anything and aren’t capable of labor. They call themselves the intelligentsia but they talk ... to their peasants as if they were animals ... don’t read anything serious, do absolutely nothing ... they philosophize, but meanwhile before their very eyes, the workers ... sleep without pillows, thirty or forty in a single room, everywhere there are bedbugs, stench, dampness, immorality ... So apparently all these good conversations we have serve only to delude ourselves and others.²³

In a similarly critical spirit Joseph Epstein wrote of Dwight Macdonald that he was “the intellectual par excellence, which is to say that without any specialized knowledge he was prepared to comment on everything ... and always with what seemed an unwavering confidence.” Epstein further suggested that “another of MacDonald’s core ideas was that the job of intellectuals was to keep up critical pressure, especially on his own country, which, by definition, can never be good enough.” Macdonald believed – as did many other intellectuals – that their “first priority” was dissent from what they considered the conventional wisdom and the status quo. Irving Howe, another well-known intellectual, also believed, as Epstein put it, that “the intellectual was always an outsider, and intellectual life was really only valid when one lived it as a member of a minority. This minority was to be in permanent opposition,

²² Reinhard Bendix: *Embattled Reason: Essays on Social Knowledge*, Vol. II, New Brunswick NJ 1989, 424, 426. In a similar spirit it was observed of Norman Mailer that “he was a play outlaw,” that is to say, his rebelliousness was compatible with high income, celebrity status, and overall security (See Louis Menand: “The Norman Invasion,” *New Yorker*, October 21, 2013, 96). The same phenomenon was captured in the concept of “tenured radicals” (the title of Roger Kimball’s 1990 book).

²³ Anton Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*, Indianapolis 2010, 29–30 (first published 1913).

in state of perpetual dissatisfaction with the world as it is.”²⁴ Tom Wolfe considered the enlarged capacity for moral indignation their essential attribute: “From the very onset the eminence of this new creature, the intellectual ... was inseparable from his *necessary* indignation. It was his moral indignation that elevated him to a plateau of moral superiority.”²⁵ In turn, cultivating such a sense of moral superiority has been an essential part of nurturing a favorable self-conception.

More recently, Franklin Foer wrote that “feelings of embattlement are the very qualities that would attract a romantic like Howe to a career as an intellectual: the nobility of the lonely stand, the feverish devotion to the unappreciated idea.”²⁶ Likewise Jean-Paul Sartre believed that the uncritical and politically disengaged intellectual was not a genuine intellectual but “a mere ‘technician of practical knowledge’ or a ‘theoretician of the bourgeois class.’” Gramsci shared this view, calling the politically committed intellectual “organic,” a term of approval.²⁷

Such idealized views of the intellectual are reminiscent of the older conception of the (pre-Soviet) Russian intelligentsia, in particular “the sense of moral responsibility” central to it. As Isaiah Berlin has written, the Russian intelligentsia “was founded ... on the idea of a permanent rational opposition to the status quo,” and he also suggested that this intelligentsia “was generated by truly oppressive regimes.”²⁸ But he did not believe that conditions in contemporary pluralistic Western societies were like those in Russia, implying that modern Western intellectuals differ, or ought to differ, in their outlook from the Russian intelligentsia of the past, as *their* social criticism has not been a response to dire, repressive conditions such as used to prevail in nineteenth-century Russia. What Berlin did not point out is that many contemporary Western and especially American intellectuals have often *claimed* (especially since the 1960s) to be oppressed and threatened by the status quo in order to authenticate their social criticism and political protest. It is likely that

²⁴ Joseph Epstein: *Essays in Biography*, Mount Jackson VA 2012, 191, 207, 234. More generally Epstein noted “the intellectuals’ overdependence on ideas, and their consequent detachment from reality” (“Intellectuals – Public and Otherwise,” *Commentary*, May 2000, 49).

²⁵ Tom Wolfe: *Hooking Up*, New York 2000, 117. See also Jillian Jordan et al.: “The Point of Moral Outrage,” *Sunday Review*, *New York Times*, February 28, 2016.

²⁶ Franklin Foer: “Partisan Reviewer,” *New York Times Book Review*, January 18, 2015, 16.

²⁷ Sartre quoted in Kefa Artaraz: *Cuba and Western Intellectuals Since 1959*, New York 2009, 155; on Gramsci, *ibid.*, 157–158.

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin: *The Power of Ideas*, Princeton NJ 2000, 104, 108, 207.

Introduction

9

to the extent that present-day American public intellectuals are familiar with the social-political roles and attributes of the Russian intelligentsia of the past, they would strongly identify with them.²⁹

To sum up, intellectuals are well-educated, idealistic people of a social-critical disposition and high expectations, preoccupied with moral, cultural, political, and social issues, mainly employed (at the present time) by academic institutions in departments of humanities and social sciences.

As regards the attitudes probed in this study, an important distinction has to be made between those intellectuals who lived in countries ruled by dictators and those who observed them from a safe distance. The attitudes of these two groups require, at last in part, different interpretation. The positive views of dictators held by intellectuals who did not live under the repressive political systems may seem at first glance more puzzling. These views were also more disinterested and idealistic, less colored by opportunistic motives, including fear. Western intellectuals who sympathized with dictators had little to gain, or lose, by the public expression of such sentiments. It helps to understand their attitude to point out that they knew very little about the actual conditions in the idealized countries or about their leaders, and were not subject to any pressure to praise them. By contrast intellectuals who lived in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the Soviet Union, communist China, and Cuba were obligated, at any rate in their public utterances, to express nothing but unwavering reverence and support for these systems and their rulers; at the same time they were far better informed about the realities of these societies. But it is also true that during the early years of these systems – especially in Germany and Italy – there was strong and genuine support for them among intellectuals (as well as the general public) that cannot be reduced to opportunistic motives. Many of these intellectuals were, at least in the earlier stages in the evolution of these systems, idealistic and took pride in the apparent material and social progress being made.³⁰

Somewhat unexpectedly, a characterization of the attitude of Egyptian intellectuals toward Nasser's regime seems to apply to many intellectuals who lived in the dictatorships here discussed. Tawfig al-Hakim, an Egyptian writer, "spoke for most Egyptian intellectuals describing how,

²⁹ In recent decades "public intellectual" has been increasingly substituted for "intellectual," conveying a conception of the intellectual I suggested above.

³⁰ This proposition applies probably more to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy than to the communist states. In any event, in entrenched totalitarian systems it was difficult to gauge how genuine such enthusiasm was.

despite the forced conformity, censorship, hypocrisy and repression of the Nasser era, the regime ‘bewitched us with the glitter of hopes that had fascinated us for a long time, and they intoxicated us with the wine of “attainment” and “glory”’.³¹

The phenomenon discussed in his study compels reflection and exploration because we do not expect intellectuals to sympathize with dictators, let alone admire them – we expect them to possess sound political and moral judgment. Edward Shils, the distinguished sociologist, believed that

intellectuals possess an unusual sensitivity to the sacred, an uncommon reflectiveness about the nature of their universe and the rules which govern their society ... [they are] inquiring and desirous of being in frequent communion with symbols which are more general than the immediate concrete situations of everyday life ... This interior need to penetrate beyond the screen of immediate concrete experience marks the existence of the intellectuals in every society.³²

Regrettably enough, the many available instances of the dubious, sometimes severely impaired political judgments of intellectuals do not support the view of Shils. For example, it may be noted here “that one of the greatest European universities [Cambridge, UK] ... had provided the USSR with its most devoted and effective agents ... symbolic of the force of the Communist idea in the twentieth century.”³³ Furet was referring to Philby, MacLean, Burgess, and Blunt, all of whom became Soviet spies devoting their lives to serving the Soviet system. He could have added Eric Hobsbawm to this roster of prominent pro-communist intellectuals who studied at Cambridge University since he too was a lifelong Soviet sympathizer, without becoming a spy.

We expect (or used to expect) more of intellectuals; we think of them as an elite group, a moralizing elite, free of illusions and delusions and endowed with an enlarged capacity for differentiating between good and evil, as well as between appearance and reality. We don’t expect intellectuals to suspend the use of their critical faculties under certain conditions: for example, when they are taken on a political conducted tour,

³¹ Quoted in Barry Rubin: *Modern Dictators*, New York 1987, 73.

³² Edward Shils: *The Intellectuals and the Powers and Other Essays*, Chicago 1972, 3. For a sweeping critique of intellectuals based on a very small and somewhat questionable sample, see Paul Johnson: *Intellectuals*, New York 1988. His views are further discussed in Chapter 8.

³³ Furet, 272. Indicative of similar conditions in another elite institution, in the late 1940s reportedly “one student in four at the *Ecole Normale* (Superior, in France) was a member of the Communist cell” (Francois Fejto: “Letter from Paris,” *Encounter*, December 1982, 60).