

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Institute for European Studies

Europe's Century of Discontent
The Legacies of Fascism, Nazism and
Communism

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THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY MAGNES PRESS, JERUSALEM

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PREFACE

This volume is based on papers delivered at an international conference “Reflections on Europe’s Century of Discontent: Confronting the Legacies of Fascism, Nazism and Communism,” held at the Institute for European Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on 10–12 March 2002.

The impetus for the conference were our feelings that with the demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, a number of questions regarding the conventional understanding of totalitarianism could possibly be viewed in a new light. The classical studies of totalitarianism after World War II were undertaken when Nazism and Fascism had been vanquished, while the Soviet system still existed and appeared to have come out strengthened, surviving the travails of the war and even extending its boundaries with the imposition of Soviet-style rule on the countries of Eastern Europe, only recently liberated from Nazi German occupation and indigenous forms of Fascism. The comparison between right-wing defeated totalitarian regimes and the still existing – and apparently flourishing – Soviet system was premised on a built-in asymmetry. After 1989, it was felt that a new, less oblique perspective became possible for the first time.

With this in mind, our aim was to address a number of issues both on the level of theory and as well as historical experience. Given these possible new research horizons, we asked the conference participants to take another look at the conventional theories of totalitarianism and try to distil from them those insights which have withstood the shifting paradigms developed in the study of totalitarianism over the last decades. We were also aware of the fact that the classical models of totalitarianism have been developed by scholars who managed to flee either from Nazism or Communism, and consequently have not themselves lived under these regimes, nor have they undertaken systematic studies of them as they have existed in reality: Popper, Arendt, Talmon, Friedrich and (to a lesser extent) Brzezinski, have mainly developed their paradigms as political theorists, not social scientists.

How much of this has been vindicated by what we have learned, in the meantime, about these systems – and how much has to be revised?

Because terror and mass murder have accompanied Fascism, Nazism and Communism, we asked whether these have been inherent in the internal logic of their thought systems, or whether their emergence could be seen as an outcome of historical contingencies. Related to this, we suggested to the participants to try to address the extent to which there have been significant chasms between ideology and its realization in the different systems.

With the new perspectives made available after 1989, we also asked the participants to reflect on the different ways in which the various systems came to their end: here through a crushing military defeat inflicted from outside, there via an internal implosion. Furthermore, we asked them to look into the question whether the different ways of their demise left different legacies for the successor regimes and the societies grown out of the debacles.

Last but not least, while we were not trying to answer the excruciating question of “the lesser evil,” can one say today that “left” and “right” totalitarianism were basically, as was usually claimed during the Cold War, merely two different forms of the same phenomenon – or that there were such fundamental differences in their ideological premises and structures that the behavior of both regimes as well as their ultimate fate cannot be divorced from these differences.

Because the nature of the questions asked moved from the theoretical to the practical, we were happy to have as participants not only scholars but also a number of persons who were instrumental in the dramatic post-1989 transformations, primarily in Poland and Hungary.

We would like to thank Ms. Révital Goldberg, Executive Secretary of the Institute for European Studies at the Hebrew University, for her unstinting devotion and perseverance in the organization of the conference and the preparation of this volume. Without her dedication and stamina, the conference – which was held during a difficult period in Israel – would not have taken place.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the dedicated work of the staff of The Magnes Press and especially its managing director, Dan Benovici. Also, Shlomo Ketko was extremely helpful in editing the text, and he deserves the most sincere thanks both from the editors and all participants. We would also like to thank Ms. Tamar Soffer, of the Department of Geography at the Hebrew University, for her extremely useful help with the map used on the book's cover.

Finally, we would like to thank the authors, some of whom had to travel great distances and decided, despite everything, to come to Jerusalem in troubled times. We greatly appreciate their decision to join us under these circumstances and to help us elucidate one of the major scourges of our time.

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