

Cross-Culture Memory Of Totalitarianism, A Theoretical Tool

1. A Historiographic Debate

During the cold war, the classic approaches of political philosophy (Hannah Arendt, Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Bzezinski, Eric Vogelín, Karl Jaspers, Raymond Aaron), or those of notorious authors such as Simone Weil, Thomas Mann, Waldemar Gurian distinguished a number of features common to the two forms of totalitarianism: fascism and communism. We mention them here because these features were not contested, not even later on, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first of these distinctive features is *an official ideology* consisting of a body of doctrine, covering all vital aspects of human existence, to which everybody living under the respective totalitarian regime was forced to adhere, at least passively. This ideology was profoundly utopian, pretending to create a new world and a new man. The second distinctive feature is *the existence of a single mass party*, often led by a single person, „a dictator” (Hitler, Stalin, Ceausescu), hierarchically and oligarchically organized. The party assumed a leading role in society, even over the bureaucratic government organization together with which it formed the so-called nomenclature. The third distinctive feature of the model is a *political police terrorist system*, supported by and but also controlling the party. This system was directed against social or racial classes or groups, functioning arbitrarily through surveillance systems and informer networks. The fourth factor is the system of *absolute control and monopoly over the media* (press, radio, television, printing houses), exercised through censure and used as a tool of ideological propaganda. Finally, two other distinctive features may be identified in the control over the army and the directed economy characterized by bureaucratic centralized coordination. These characteristics, to be found in Hannah Arendt’s classic „The Origins of Totalitarianism” (1951), are the matrix of an entire academic tradition of the 50’s and 60’s.

The participation of historians in this debate drew attention on the diversity of these regimes’ concrete embodiments in different countries, on different continents or in different eras (the main turning points before and after the Second World War being the death of Stalin and the Spring of 1968).

The totalitarianism concept was unquestionably resurrected after 1989, and this was especially visible during the 90’s, with the new approaches of the Nazi and Soviet regimes comparison. We mention here, for instance, the opinion of two German researchers, Ernest Nolte and Rainer Zitelmann, who pushed the comparison as far as

considering the two regimes similar. Nolte stated that the Nazi racial genocide was merely following the Bolshevik class genocide that preceded it, and Zitelmann, in his 1991 book *Die totalitäre Seite der Moderne*, saw the same totalitarian face of modernity in the two regimes. Jan Kernshaw and Moshe Lewin, on the other hand, made, in their *Stalinism and Nazism, Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge 1997), a thorough analysis of the limits of the totalitarianism concept, applied to the two types of regime. The most important arguments of their critique are the following: the totalitarianism concept applied to the Nazi and Stalinist regimes can only be used to point out two similarities of the two types of dictatorship: the absolute power of the regime over its subjects and the distortion of the governing structures. As soon as we proceed to an analysis of the post-Stalinist soviet system, the concept of totalitarianism can be used to describe rather a violent, revolutionary transitional phase, then the characteristics related to the life experience of citizens living under such regimes. According to Jan Kernshaw, the crucial differences are determined by the nature of the authority in the two regimes. While Hitler was indispensable to Nazism, communism could very well do without Stalin. This observation does not refer to the nature of the two dictators' personalities, but to the different types of authority they stand for.

Two important moments may be mentioned in the evolution of this historical debate - *Historikerstreit*. The first is the establishment of the Potsdam Contemporary History Centre (1992), meant to facilitate a thorough comparative study of the two Germanies, the Nazi and the communist states. The second is the re-launching of the debate by the French historiography during 1997-1998, especially through the epistolary dialogue between Ernest Nolte and François Furet and through the especially dedicated issues of the *Commentaire* magazine.

François Furet pointed out the relevance of Hannah Arendt's first suggestion: the two regimes were a novelty compared to those preceding them, on which they grew and which they destroyed. At the same time, while exposing the limits of this type of common features analysis, Furet notes error in comparing only the national-socialism and Stalinist Russia, without integrating the Mussolini model among the examples of fascism and the Maoist, Romanian, Cambodian and North-Korean models among the examples of communist dictatorships. Besides this different anatomy of the regimes, the second matter raised by Ernest Nolte and shared by François Furet is the two regimes' historic and genetic development. Since we cannot infer Nazism from Communism as Nolte, we can neither be oblivious to the fact that both regimes stemmed from and blossomed on the soil of modern democracies, the diseases of which they are.

2. The memory of totalitarianism

The object of our analysis is the theoretical debate because it is reflected differently at the memory level. Nobody can question today, almost 20 years after the fall of communism, the fact that the two forms of totalitarianism were not treated equally at the level of the historical memory. It is obvious for the entire public opinion and academic world that the Jewish people want to preserve the uniqueness of the Shoah experience and to oppose it to any other form of genocide. Important Catholic scholars such as Paul Claudel, Jacques Maritain or Cardinal Lustiger shared this stand, seeing in the mystery of the Jewish people's suffering certain signs of a divine choice, hence its uniqueness. The disparity between the two memories was explained in Alain Besançon's famous *L'hypermnésie du nazisme et amnésie du communisme* (The *Hypermnnesia of Nazism and the Amnesia of Communism*). The causes of such strabismus are many. The strongest is the double standard applied today to the two ideologies. Political correctness exercise a massive pressure on anti-Semitism and negationism/revisionism is penalized. Nazi groups are illegal anywhere in the civilized world, and the community of democratic countries exercise important pressure on the countries where there are extreme right parties. On the other hand, the tolerance shown to communism is ever more evident, with the only example to contradict it being the constantly evoked American McCarthyism of the 50's.

The persistence of communism as an ideology still embraced by parties well-known in the public life of Western Europe, but also as a regime in Cuba, North Korea or China does is not a shock to anyone. The ambiguous way in which the public opinion and politicians in democratic countries have been handling the cultural genocide in Tibet committed by communist China, an issue recently returned to the public attention, leads to the conclusion that the public opinion cannot recognize here a serious racist crime of which communism should be held guilty.

The second cause is geopolitical. The memory of United Europe is still divided by the experiences its different countries went through. In the countries of the former Eastern block, the various degrees in which the „trial of communism” imposed a lustration of former employees and collaborators of the political police had direct consequences on the building up, dissemination and maintenance of the memory of communism. The vectors of this process were mostly the civil society, the academic world and the victims themselves. In the instances where the state authorities participated in this process, as it happened in Romania, such authorities used an academic approach, not a legal management of the phenomenon. The transfer and assimilation of such memory in school books and in the teaching process involved in the educational system favors this memory to the disadvantage of the holocaust memory. At the same time, Western Europe complies with the political and moral standards imposed to the public opinion and institutions by the Shoah memory, but partially or totally ignores the memory of communism, or subordinates it to the memory of the Cold War.

What is the contribution of a civic education project for the European memory can bring to this theoretical and political approach of the totalitarian memory? We shall proceed to formulate a few proposals which seem to address urgent needs:

1. As an anthropologic experience of passing on, memory depends on **the concrete means of transfer from a generation to another**. The positive review of the last twenty years' experience shows a major imbalance between the two components of memory transmission: the favoring of the academic content of the research, in the case of the communism memory and the favoring of anamnesis techniques (recollection) in the case of the Shoah memory. With the passing of time, it is obvious that both run the major risk of becoming museum exhibits, as the direct witnesses grow fewer and fewer. Focusing on live testimony, accompanied by the identification of the "lieux de mémoires" in the sense of Pierre Norat's theory represent an emergency. A generation of youth who can still see and listen to live witnesses shall be a live transmission instrument for the future generations who will no longer have this opportunity and will have to settle with the memory places.

2. The theoretical revision of the strong models built so far, from the point of view of building the united Europe. The political philosophy model of a sole, two-faced totalitarianism, based on historic differences, should be resized according to the **European cultural diversity model**, unanimously recognized as a defining factor of reunited Europe's identity. This model, brought to light by the Catholic Church magisterium in John Paul the 2nd's encyclicals is based historically and anthropologically on the unity of Christian values viewed and lived in the cultural diversity of our continent. In other words, the heuristic value of the cultural diversity model has the advantage of maintaining the dynamic balance between the recognition of an axiological unity and a cultural diversity, the latter meaning a set of complex factors, more important than the historic diversity, by its essence a division rather than a cohesion factor. The cultural diversity resides in the way in which each people shaped the historical memory of collective experiences.

3. A new reflection on the **conflictual memory concept**. It is obvious at a first glance that one and the same person, one and the same people could experience both faces of totalitarianism. An example for the first category is Mariane Buber-Neumann, held in Nazi camps as well as in Soviet camps, and an example for the second category is Poland, occupied simultaneously by Russia and Germany, but also Romania and Hungary, countries which passed successively through the Jewish deportation experience, as well as through the communist repression. In our opinion, the example of these three countries as a case study may be of the same major methodological importance as the parallel study of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, the main comparison with a theoretical dimension that captured the attention of interested researchers. Moreover, the conflicting memory of the two experiences, lived successively by the same people, amongst which there were victims as well as

torturers, highlights/points out/to an aspect which is to the same extent enigmatic and significant: the degree of adhesion to the totalitarian regime but at the same time the degree of resistance. The resistance memory includes not only the righteous, the victims and the persecuted, but also the so-called “islands of separation”, the family, the church, the universities. Moral indignation, civic disengagement, religious scruples, patriotic fervor or class antagonism are all part of the complex body of totalitarianism resistance.

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