

totalitarian A totalitarian dictatorship is often defined as a system in which a dictator is able to impose their will on party, state and society – all of which are strictly disciplined. Such regimes come to power as the result of a mass movement or revolution and, at least in theory, are committed to a radical ideology and programme of political, economic and social change. The term is usually applied to regimes such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. However, many historians question whether all sections of society in such regimes were totally passive. Even the historian Robert Conquest, who used to advocate a stronger totalitarian interpretation, now concedes that Stalin was not always able to impose his will. Other possible examples of totalitarian dictatorships are those of Mao in China and – less convincingly – of Castro in Cuba.

Totalitarian dictatorships

In any comparative study of single-party states, it is important to understand the debate surrounding the application of the 'totalitarian' label. In fact, the history of the term 'totalitarian' is complex. Those historians who argue that fascist and communist dictatorships were similar tend to believe that all such regimes were totalitarian dictatorships with many features in common.

SOURCE A

Stalin's police state is not an approximation to, or something like, or in some respects comparable with Hitler's. It is the same thing, only *more* ruthless, *more* cold-blooded ... and *more* dangerous to democracy and civilised morals.

Eastman, M. 1955. *Reflections on the Failure of Socialism*. New York, USA. Devin-Adair. p. 87.

However, such totalitarian theories were first developed by US theorists during the Cold War in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Several historians and political commentators from the 1960s onwards pointed out that the attempt to equate the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany was essentially a crude attempt to persuade public opinion in the USA and other Western countries to accept permanent war preparations and military threats against the Soviet Union after 1945.

The concept of totalitarianism – or total political power – was first developed systematically by Giovanni Amendola in 1923. In 1925, Mussolini took over Amendola's term and claimed that fascism was based on a 'fierce totalitarian will', stating that all aspects of the state, politics, and cultural and spiritual life should be 'fascistised': 'Everything within the state. Nothing outside the state. Nothing against the state.' Since then, several historians have attempted to define the meaning of the term 'totalitarian' by identifying certain basic features that are not normally features of authoritarian dictatorships. For a fuller examination of these, see page 30.

Summary

By the time you have worked through this book, you should be able to:

- understand and explain the various factors behind the origins and rise of single-party states, and be able to evaluate the different historical interpretations surrounding them
- show an awareness of the role of leaders and ideology in the rise to power of such regimes
- show a broad understanding of the nature of different single-party states
- understand the methods used by such leaders and regimes to maintain and consolidate power, including how opposition groups were treated, and the use of repression and propaganda
- understand the key economic and social policies of such regimes, their impact on society, and their successes and failures
- understand and explain the various policies towards women, ethnic minorities and organised religion.