

TOTALITARIANISM

Totalitarianism is a form of government that theoretically permits no individual freedom and that seeks to subordinate all aspects of individual life to the authority of the state. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini coined the term *totalitario* in the early 1920s to characterize the new fascist state of Italy, which he further described as “all within the state, none outside the state, none against the state.”

By the beginning of World War II, totalitarianism had become synonymous with absolute and oppressive single-party government. Other modern examples of totalitarian states include the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, the People’s Republic of China under Mao, and North Korea under the Kim dynasty.

In the broadest sense, totalitarianism is characterized by strong central rule that attempts to control and direct all aspects of individual life through coercion and repression. Nazi Germany from 1933–45 and the Soviet Union during the Stalin era were the first examples of popular totalitarianism, in which the state achieved overwhelming popular support for its leadership. That support was not spontaneous: its development depended on a charismatic leader, and it was made possible only by modern developments in communication and transportation.

Totalitarianism is often distinguished from dictatorship, despotism, or tyranny by its supplanting of all political institutions with new ones and its sweeping away of all legal, social, and political traditions. The totalitarian state pursues some special goal, such as industrialization or conquest, to the exclusion of all others. All resources are directed toward its attainment regardless of the cost. Whatever might further the goal is supported; whatever might foil the goal is rejected. This obsession creates an ideology that explains everything in terms of the goal of state control – destroying all

forces that may contend with the state. The conditioned people follow the leader. The resulting popular support permits the state the widest latitude of action of any form of government. Any dissent is branded evil, and internal political differences are not permitted.

Because pursuit of the goal of total control is the only ideological foundation for the totalitarian state, achievement of the goal can never be acknowledged. Under totalitarian rule, traditional social institutions and organizations are discouraged and suppressed. Thus, the social fabric is weakened and people become more amenable to absorption into a single, unified movement. Participation in approved public organizations is at first encouraged and then required. Old religious and social ties are replaced by artificial ties to the state and its ideology. As individualism diminishes, most of the people embrace the totalitarian state's ideology. The diversity among individuals blurs, replaced by a mass conformity to the beliefs and behavior sanctioned by the state.

Large-scale organized violence becomes permissible and sometimes necessary under totalitarian rule, justified by the overriding commitment to the state ideology and pursuit of the state's goal. In Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, whole classes of people, such as the Jews and the kulaks (wealthy peasant farmers) respectively, were singled out for persecution and extinction. In each case the persecuted were linked with some external enemy and blamed for the state's troubles, and thereby public opinion was aroused against them and their fate at the hands of the military and police was condoned.

Police operations within a totalitarian state often appear similar to those within an old fashioned dictatorship, but one important difference distinguishes them. In a dictatorship, the police operate according to known consistent procedures. In a totalitarian state, the police operate without the

constraints of laws and regulations. Their actions are unpredictable and directed by the whim of the rulers.

These essential features of totalitarianism – dictatorship, control over social institutions, police violence, and the destruction of the individual – become possible in a world like ours, where mass communication and digital surveillance have become refined arts. As the world moves through the 21st century, people must be made aware of the dangers of totalitarianism.