

Preface

The present work constitutes an effort to better understand the origins of the major revolutionary ideologies of the twentieth century. It attempts to reconstruct the evolution of those ideologies from their initial source in the heritage left by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—to the rationale for totalitarianism they were to become. Basically, it seeks to track that evolution into Leninism and Italian Fascism.

Some years ago, Zeev Sternhell traced the Fascist ideas of Benito Mussolini to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century revolutionary ideas in France. At the same time, he made allusion to sources in the specifically Marxist tradition—and spoke of a “second main component” of Fascist ideology as a peculiar “revision” of the Marxism it inherited.*

The present study attempts to trace the influences that shaped that revision—for it will be argued that much, if not all, revolutionary thought in the twentieth century was shaped by just such revisions of traditional Marxism. The tracing is often difficult. There are innumerable asides amidst the attempts by authors, in the revolutionary traditions of Europe at the time, to address and resolve a clutch of critical questions that turned on complex epistemological, normative, and scientific concerns left unresolved by the founders of “historical materialism.”

It was left to Marxism’s intellectual heirs to address the question of how *materialism*, as ontology and epistemology, was to be understood. There was the notion of “inevitabilities” and the “logic” of history—and the question of just how human choice might function in a deterministic universe.

*Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 12.

And there was the problem of the place of Darwinism, the struggle for existence, and the influence of biology in all of that. With Engels's passing in 1895, all this was bequeathed to the good offices of Marxists who varied in their gifts and perspectives.

Even before the death of Engels, "revisionisms" began to gather on the horizon. Most of the revisionism that was to follow was the result of the efforts made to address all those problems left unsettled by the founders of Marxism. It is to those revisionisms that the present work will direct the reader's attention.

The exposition attempts to fill in some of the intellectual space that separates classical Marxism from its revolutionary variants, and the totalitarian forms to which those variants ultimately committed themselves. It will selectively follow the development of all these variants into political totalitarianism—that peculiar institutionalization that ultimately came to typify their collective goal culture, and profoundly shape the history of the last century.

One might have expected that intellectual historians would make it a priority to explain why totalitarianism was fostered and sustained by both the revolutionary "left" as well as their counterparts on the "right." In fact, remarkably little has been done in that regard.

Martin Malia, for his part, spoke of the "conceptual poverty" associated with Western efforts to come to grips with the reality of "communist" totalitarianism.* I would suggest that much of its failure stems from the opacity that surrounds the ideological discussions that arose out of the very uncertainty of the philosophic and social science claims made by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century. The present account attempts to outline some of the tortured discussions that collected around those claims. As will be argued, those discussions ultimately shaped the totalitarianism that emerged out of the putative liberality and humanity of classical Marxism.

It is hoped that the present effort will contribute to our understanding of the twentieth century—the century that long will be remembered as perhaps the most destructive in human history. It is something of a cautionary tale, addressed to those who insist on reading revolutionary radicalism as the solitary hope available to the modern world. To the rest of us, it is intended as information, as part of an attempt to settle our accounts with the twentieth century.

* Martin Malia, "Foreword," Stéphane Courtois (ed.), *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, translated by Johnathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. x.