

The Uses of Terror

ALEXANDER DALLIN AND GEORGE W. BRESLAUER: *Political Terror in Communist Systems*.
Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1970.

Reviewed by Carl J. Friedrich

THIS SLENDER VOLUME, agreeably compact and very readable, is a welcome addition to the long and protracted discussion concerning the role of terror in totalitarian regimes. While its subject matter is confined to the use of terror in Communist states, it invites comparison with other policies—especially since the authors posit that “terror has been a hallmark of all societies.” Skillfully written, the book essays a comparative analysis of the role and function of terror in societies located at various points in time and space; the general conclusion reached seems to be that the uses of terror have varied greatly depending on the circumstances under which it was employed.

The general theoretical framework of the book is suggested by the authors’ definition of political terror as signifying “the arbitrary use, by organs of political authority, of severe coercion against individuals and groups, the credible threat of such use, or the arbitrary extermination of such individuals or groups.” Such terror, in the “functional” approach adopted by the authors, may be functional or dysfunctional,¹ depending upon the purpose to be served or even the time span considered; for what may appear functional in the short run may turn out to be dysfunctional in the long run. (This functional approach can, of course, be applied to numerous pejorative terms and the phenomena corresponding to them, such as corruption, betrayal, treason, and especially violence, of which terror appears to be an extreme form.) But if terror is

so defined, the authors’ proposition that it is the hallmark of all societies seems rather questionable. For surely Great Britain and Switzerland, to name two modern regimes, were not characterized by the arbitrary use of severe coercion—though in Great Britain’s case one must exclude the treatment of the colonial possessions and Ireland.

However, if the authors’ assertion concerning the universal applicability of terror is open to dispute, they are certainly correct in stressing the essentiality and centrality of terror to totalitarian systems. (It should be noted, though, that the authors are not sufficiently discriminating on this point: while their original definition of political terror calls the phenomenon “the linchpin of totalitarianism”—which points to the essentiality of terror in the system—the footnote to this passage speaks of the centrality of terror.) Where I differ from the authors is that whereas they define terror as an objective “given” of governmental behavior (or misbehavior), I would be inclined to stress more the psychological aspects of terror; for to be terrorized seems to me a psychic state of extreme frustration that may be induced by imaginary (as well as by real) dangers. Thus the state of mind of some minorities in the United States is that of terror, though the objective situation may well not justify it.

Taking as their point of departure the concept of terror as a governmental instrumentality, Dallin and Breslaauer proceed to analyze in broad comparative terms its use in the various developmental stages of Communist systems: the take-over stage (ch. 2), the mobilizational stage (chs. 3, 4, 5) and the post-mobilizational stage. Clearly, the concept of mobilization—used here in the sense now familiar

¹ The authors follow the current unfortunate custom of spelling this word as “dysfunctional,” wrongly combining a Greek prefix with an adjective of Latin derivation.

in the study and analysis of underdeveloped countries (*i.e.*, as the activation of latent popular energy for collective action)—is very important to the analysis. Complementing the sequential scheme of terror used in the take-over, mobilization and post-mobilization stages are chapters on the dynamics, dialectics and disfunction of terror (ch. 7) and a final balance sheet of the costs and benefits of terror to governments using it.

That balance sheet is, the authors find, very difficult if not impossible to draw up. They cite Robert K. Merton to the effect that there is always “the difficult problem of developing an *organon* for assessing the net balance of consequences” in judging the functionality of actions. Not only, to cite Merton again, may “some items be functional for some individuals and subgroups and disfunctional for others,” but an item may have both functional and disfunctional consequences. A major difficulty, they feel, “stems from the fact that whether or not a given effect is considered a plus or minus ultimately depends on the values that the observer attaches to the variables and goals.”

This conclusion appears to me excessively relativistic. For the efficiency with which a particular system functions is a datum which may be evaluated with reasonable objectivity irrespective of whether the observer likes the system or not. It is of course true that, in the authors’ words, “to Communist policy-makers themselves what was judged desirable at one stage may have seemed counterproductive later, when the full consequences could be seen.” But this judgment involves a broader kind of concept than that of functionality; and the fact that policy-makers may err in their assessment of functionality does not prove that “ultimately” such subjective assessment is decisive. Quite to the contrary, it proves that such assessment can best be treated as hypothetical in nature—as is the case with judgments about other pathological phenomena in politics, such as corruption and betrayal.

The authors conclude that “terror proves to be ambiguous in its effects.” And they add that “if then we ask whether terror is necessary or essential for a Communist regime, we can point back to our earlier conclusion that totalitarianism does indeed imply arbitrary and severe coercion.” This seems to imply that the use of terror is part of totalitarianism by definition—as this writer would argue. Indeed, at one point, Dallin and Breslauer state explicitly that “at the mobilization stage of its development a Communist policy committed to the exercise of total control and the prompt implementation of sweeping change does require purposive

terror”—which would seem to be in agreement with my thesis. However, the authors go on to say that “*commitment to these goals is neither necessary nor inevitable*, but once it is made, terror follows with iron logic” (*italics added*).

But how are we to imagine a Communist regime which is not committed to the twin goals of total control and sweeping change? If it does not call for sweeping change, what kind of Communist system could it be—a partially capitalist one? This writer has argued that a Communist system can afford to permit freedom of expression as long as the regime’s taboos are respected and there is no organized dissent—as the authors candidly recall. But such limited permissiveness in one sphere of political life is a far different matter from a policy which would abandon the call for “sweeping” changes; for the abandonment of what seems to me the “necessary” goal of sweeping change could not be carried out unless communism were to abandon the core of its ideology.

On the same assumption that communism can afford to be permissive on issues not pertaining to its ideological core, one can readily agree with the statement that “it is undeniable that the escalation of coercion into both situational terror and purposive liquidation of the kulaks was not essential to the realization of Soviet goals.” One can further agree with the authors’ dictum that Stalin’s “Great Purge cannot be justified by the priority goal of economic development: it came after the critical breakthrough.” Still, if the Great Purge cannot be rationalized in this fashion, it may well have been functional on other grounds up to the time when Stalin called a halt to it.

Finally, the authors explore, if ever so briefly, certain variables which influence the application of terror in Communist systems. These variables include the historical sequence in which terror appears, the mode of take-over by the Communists, the level of socio-economic development in the country affected, political stability, organizational level, traditional political culture, national experience, the values of the elite and of the dictator personally, as well as certain external influences. It all adds up to the conclusion that it is well-nigh impossible to state any generalizations concerning the functionality of terror beyond saying that sometimes and under certain conditions terror is functional, and at other times and under different conditions it is not functional. The authors also express the wish that their path-finding comparative study be followed by others which hopefully will provide more specific conclusions about the when and the

how of terror's functionality—a sentiment with which this reviewer fully concurs.

From the discussion of the functionality of terror in the mobilization stage of Communist systems, the authors turn to its application—or the lack of it—in the post-mobilization stage. We are told, “the trend away from political terror at the post-mobilization stage is unmistakable, but it is not consistent.” While the authors feel that “as social scientists we cannot predict that a given [Communist] leader will choose to ignore the enormous cost of a return to mass terror,” they believe that “it is likely that there is no rational alternative to the abandonment of terror.” The inordinately high social, economic and political costs of terror outweigh any conceivable benefits its use might yield in an increasingly modernized society,” or so Dallin and Breslauer opine. I wish I could be as sure. Czechoslovakia is admittedly a special case, but it shows that when ideological and power-political issues are at stake, the requirements of a modernized system may be disregarded and terror may be reinstituted.

This particular example also shows why the term “terror,” as used in this book, is unfortunate in one way: despite the broad definition favored by the authors (and this reviewer), it tends to evoke in the mind of the average reader the extremes of Stalin's Great Purge and Mao's Cultural Revolution, in which blood, much of it innocent, flowed in torrents. Actually, the record shows that much of the most effective kind of political terror manifests itself in an atmosphere of widespread fear of arbitrary punishment and arrest, and the consequent suspicion of all by all. This kind of terror is not likely to disappear, and there is little evidence to support the authors' view that the elites of Communist regimes “are bound to conclude that the costs of terror far exceed its gains.” Indeed, there are many indications that these elites conclude just the opposite, and who is to say they are wrong? Wherever in Communist countries the attempt was made to discontinue arbitrary violence, the situation very soon got out of hand—*e.g.*, in East Germany, Poland, China, and others. The ensuing backlash has resulted in the reestablishment of terror and a growing conviction on the part of the ruling Communist parties that their system does not work without terror. Therefore this reviewer must disagree with Dallin's and Breslauer's conclusion that “the dynamics of the system [Communist totalitarianism] points in the opposite direction”—*i.e.*, toward a Communist system without terror.

If terror will not disappear from Communist societies, it may however assume a more sophisti-

cated form than it took in the past; indeed, Dallin's and Breslauer's incisive presentation of the relevant facts suggests that terror in the form of intimidation becomes part of the life-style in these societies. Though the life-style of intimidation “by no means assures the adoption of the rule of law, let alone a transition to political democracy,” it does set “definite limits to the application of coercion.” This insight in turn raises the question of the limits of terror in a Communist system. What are these limits? When does coercion become excessive? The answer is that coercion becomes excessive when it becomes dysfunctional (*i.e.*, pathological), when it does not make people do what the regime wants them to do. When terror exceeds what can reasonably be borne by human beings, they will adopt passive resistance. (It is the old situation of the mule driver who learns that an excess of violence will only serve to make his animal “mulish.”) Also, terror will lose its bite when all or most people are threatened by it. To be effective, it must be selective or differentiated—this is one lesson which Communist rulers have learned from their own past excesses.

Finally, the question of the limits of power in a Communist system—whose urgency has been highlighted most usefully by the book under review—points to a universal issue, namely the question of the limits to be placed on power and coercion in all societies. It is an old problem, but no less pressing for that. The only viable answer to the abuse of power and coercion—as this writer has undertaken to point out in numerous books—is the division of political power under a constitution. It is because totalitarianism rejects the concept of the limitation of power, demanding instead that total power be placed in the hands of the class-conscious elite of the proletariat, that the abuse of power and coercion have become integral features of the Communist system. Hence terror, in its sophisticated form of intimidation, will remain operational despite its costs, and the possibility of its sudden expansion will continue to loom as an everpresent threat on the horizon of such regimes.

For no matter how noxious those costs have proven themselves to be, they are still regarded as well worth it by those who, as an old German saying goes, “have eaten wisdom with big spoons”—that is to say, by those who claim to know what is good for everybody else. Terror that forces people to see the error of their ways—whether in behavior (Stalin) or in thought (Mao)—thus remains highly functional in the Communist world as long as it accomplishes these purposes.

Man and God in Marx

- HENRY J. KOREN: *Marx and the Authentic Man*.
Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1967.
- ADAM SCHAFF: *Le Marxisme et L'Individu* (Marxism and the Individual).
Paris, Librairie Armand Collin, 1968.
- HERBERT APTHEKER, ED.: *Marxism and Christianity, A Symposium*.
New York, Humanities Press, 1968.
- ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: *Marxism and Christianity*.
New York, Schocken Books, 1968.

Reviewed by Edmund Demaitre

WHEN KARL MARX DRAFTED his Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach (proclaiming that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual; in reality it is the ensemble of social relations”), he could hardly have foreseen that the thesis—which, along with *The German Ideology*, he was to leave “to the gnawing criticism of the mice”—would become one of the central issues around which mid-20th-century debates on Marxism would revolve. For, in contrast to earlier controversies on the meaning and validity of the Marxian message, the current disputes involve mainly ontological or anthropological questions rather than the deterministic political and economic concepts on which the Marxian critique of capitalist society was built.

The sudden interest in the ontological and anthropological aspects of Marxism is hardly surprising, considering the overall context in which recent debates on Marxism have developed. Whether viewed as a prophecy, a science, or a blueprint for action, Marxism can now be subjected to an objective analysis in the light of factual observations and historical experience. Thus the critique of classical Marxism is no longer a strictly intellectual and speculative exercise, as it was in the time of Bakunin or Bernstein. For the development of a once unrestrained capitalism into a technocratic-industrial system, regulated—at least in part—by state intervention, and the emergence of socialist states, founded—at least in part—on Marxist princi-

ples, have provided entirely new dimensions for discussing Marxism in non-speculative terms. Theoretical discussions of Marx’s apodictical pronouncements on the falling rate of profit, increasing unemployment, reckless exploitation of the workers, and proletarianization of the lower middle classes have become utterly meaningless; experience has shown quite convincingly that on all these points Marx was wrong. No less futile have become the once agitated discussions on the possibility of building a collective system based on the communal ownership of the means of production, changed modes of production and production relations; experience has also shown that as far as the possibility of setting up such a system is concerned, Marx was right.

The question remains: How does the collective system perform its political, economic, social, and cultural functions in relation to the individual, viewed both as an autonomous entity and as an “atom” in a vaster community? In other words, do changed modes of production and production relations guarantee, as Marx expected, the attainment of that freedom which he defined as “the individual’s ability to develop his faculties in every direction”? To this all-important question the half-century of *praxis* of communism provides a negative rather than a positive answer. It also highlights a number of epistemological and structural ambiguities inherent in the Marxian theory as well as in its post-Marxian accretions.