APOCALYPTIC ELEMENTS AND FEAR IN TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

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Introduction

The contribution of this paper is the examination of the apocalyptic elements found in ideology and actions of totalitarian regimes. Through this examination I demonstrate how totalitarian regimes differ from other similar political regimes. While writing this paper, I initially examined which apocalyptic elements could be found in totalitarian regimes, and if they corresponded to the assumption that totalitarianism is a new phenomenon in the political field. This assumption is an already well–known claim of some political theorists, philosophers and historians. Among them, Hannah Arendt in "Origins of Totalitarianism" claims that totalitarianism is a new political regime which did not exist in the past.[1] I found that apocalyptic elements in totalitarian regimes support conclusions about their specific nature, but at the same time I note that this approach excludes many other insights about totalitarian regimes as well as the historical positioning of those regimes. For a clearer and more detailed examination of totalitarianism, a different approach would be required. However, the contribution of this paper points to, in my opinion, the most important aspect of totalitarian regimes; namely their effort to destroy the present world, create a new world, and to completely downgrade the human person to the level of an instrument used solely for preserving the system.

1. *Totalitarianism and religious elements*

Existence of religious elements in ideologies of totalitarian regimes has been (even though they were hostile towards traditional religions) analysed from different perspectives and by different theorists. These analyses have introduced concepts like "political religion", "religious ersatz", and "anti–religion". Besides many myths, symbols and rituals that were part of totalitarian regimes, there are some noticeable apocalyptic elements that were taken out

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1 Many theorists (for example Slavoj Žižek) are opposed to the idea that totalitarianism is a new form of political system.

of their Judeo–Christian context and blended with contemporary beliefs and philosophy.

Dealing with the appearance of some elements of apocalyptic myth in ideology and practices of totalitarian regimes seems a bit strange. However, in the opinion of some important scholars of totalitarianism, this perspective is perhaps important because totalitarian regimes essentially differ from similar regimes (theocracy, tyranny, authoritarian regimes) in their attempt to realize[2] a specific apocalypse. In my contribution, I don't use 'apocalypse' in its narrow sense ('revelation' or 'uncovering' from the Greek), but in its wider meaning: as a process of the end of the 'world as we know it', which at the same time means the beginning of the new, 'perfect world'.

In Nazism and Communism, which I consider in this paper, a belief in the possibility of total and immanent salvation of humanity is formed, one that coincides with total negation of the existing world (racial decadence/exploitation and slavery).[3] In both systems there existed faith in the inevitability of the new world and new human, for the fulfillment of which all possible means must be used and 'the doomed' must be sacrificed. In both forms of totalitarianism, four significant elements of apocalyptic processes[4] were present: revelation, judgment, punishment and the creation of a new earth. I will treat them in the order mentioned and at the same time try to point out the role of fear in the totalitarian version of apocalyptic ideas and tendencies.

2. *Apocalypse in Christian tradition*

Firstly, in order to demonstrate more clearly some of the important apocalyptic elements in totalitarian systems, I will summarize revelation, judgment, punishment and the creation of a new world as they are shown in the best–known apocalyptic texts, 'The Book of Revelation' in the New Testament. In the above–mentioned book, the author, John of Patmos, receives testimony of the apocalypse through the voice of Jesus Christ. John receives the revelation as a colourful vision, in which he is not just an observer, but is in-

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2   Two examples are Hannah Arendt and Waldemar Gurian. They do not use the expression 'specific apocalypse', but they point out that totalitarian regimes aim to destroy the world as it is and to create a new world, new society, and a new human being.

3   Rohrwasser, Michael: Religious and ecclesiastical structures in Communism and National Socialism, and the role of the writer, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 336.

4   Apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic myth have Judeo–Christian roots. As I pointed out in the beginning of the text, it is possible to extract some apocalyptic elements out of the ideology and action of totalitarian regimes. However, these elements are torn from the original context; belief in transcendence is abandoned and so is the most important person that gives meaning to Christian apocalyptic tradition — Jesus Christ.

volved in the happenings. He is having a conversation with one of the Elders,[5] a voice from the heaven and an angel. He takes a book from the angel …[6] But the author always has a completely marginal role, as the most important person in the Book of Revelation is, of course, Jesus Christ.

In the final judgment of apocalyptic script of the New Testament, people are divided into the chosen — those who are entered into the book of life and signed with God's name — and into the doomed — those whose names are absent from the book of life[7] but are wearing the sign of the beast (a mark with its name or with the number of its name).[8] God, at the end of times, judges people according to their deeds: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books."[9] Judgment is followed by punishment for those, whose names are not written in the Book of Life. This punishment is the second death, damnation; it is described as being thrown into the lake of fire. After all plagues, struggles and punishment, a new heaven and new earth occurs, where God is among people: "… he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."[10] God's words at the creation of the new world are: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."[11]

3. *Nazism and Communism*

3.1 Revelation

In the case of Nazism and Communism, the revelation is not so much in the form of a vision, but of a belief in the "receiver of the revelation", about its own unique capability of insight into the future — of prophetic, even divine capability. In the Nazi regime, the revelation through an inner voice and so–called, 'Providence in the form of absolute law of nature' is received by Hitler,[12] who

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5   Revelation 7:13–14.

6   Revelation 10:11.

7   Revelation 20:14–15.

8   Revelation 13:16–18.

9   Revelation 20:12.

10   Revelation 21:4.

11   Revelation 21:6.

12   Hitler's Providence, according to Romano Guardini, corresponds to destiny and success, which are completely incompatible with Christian and Jesus' Providence — with God's revelation to those who love Him. Hover, Winfrid: Terror and salvation. Experience of political

at the same time becomes the Savior for his chosen people, the Aryan race. According to Jungian analyst Edward F. Edinger, Hitler is a radical case of obsession with apocalyptic archetype (the coming of the self), which is expressed in his paradoxical dualism; at the same time he represents both a non–human beast and a Savior, and he sees himself within a religious framework.[13] It is obvious that Hitler took the divine role in Nazism. People attributed an 'almightiness' to him. He had many divine titles, he was venerated, his pictures replaced crosses in public institutions and homes, and were even placed on altars ...[14]

The combination of Marx' analysis of society and historical prophecy is the basis for communist faith that historical law will unavoidably result in the end of history. The recipients of the communist revelation of the necessity of historical law are firstly Marx, then Lenin, and at the end, Stalin (in the Soviet Union). In the frame of Marx' thought, the role of the Savior belongs to the proletariat. In the time of the October Revolution, it is transferred to the Communist Party. Meanwhile, in Stalin's era, it was transmitted to the Great Leader himself. Deification of Stalin led to the dogma of his infallibility and to the equation of Marxism with the words of Comrade Stalin, the 'Father of the Soviet Union' and the 'Leader of the World Proletariat'.[15] The intensity of Stalin's glorification was also witnessed by André Gide, who wanted to send a telegraph to Stalin and was not allowed to address him as "You", but had to choose between exalted titles such as "You, the supreme head of the workers" or "Lord of the Peoples".[16]

3.2 Judgment and fear

Both Nazi and Communist regimes divided people into friends and enemies, the saved and the doomed. The judgment that decided who would be amongst

events in the work of Romano Guardini, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 141–142.

13   Edinger, Edward F.: Archetype of the Apocalypse. Divine Vengeance, Terrorism, and the End of the World, Chicago, La Salle: Open Court 2002, 186.

14   Hover, Winfrid: Teror and salvation. Experience of political events in the work of Romano Guardini, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 146.

15   Compare with Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism, London: G. Allen & Unwin 1962, 324, where she points out that the Marxist–socialist content of Communism was lost through Stalin's constant change of ideological direction.

16   Rohrwasser, Michael: Religious and ecclesiastical structures in Communism and National Socialism, and the role of the writer, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 343.

the doomed was made in parallel to the development of the ideology. In Nazism, enemies were defined through natural law, which determines the development of races and peoples and invokes the principle of the survival of the fittest. The best among all races was the Aryan race. It was believed that the Aryan race must prevail and dominate its opposite, the Semitic race, who had devised a great world conspiracy that would not save it from unavoidable decline. In Hitler's words: "The result of each race–crossing, therefore, is … always the following: a) lowering of the level of the higher race, b) physical and intellectual decline and, with that, the onset of … infirmity. To bring about such a development means … none other than to sin against the will of the eternal creator. But this deed is also rewarded as a sin. If the human attempts to rebel against the iron logic of nature, then he falls into a struggle with the principles to which alone he owes his own existence as a human being. Thus do his actions against nature necessarily cause his own demise."[17] But among the doomed in Nazism were not only the Jews, but also anyone that could endanger the purity of the Aryan race (Roma, Slavs); ideological opponents (anti–Nazis, Communists); and "moral adversaries" (homosexuals, disabled persons). In 1941 (and in Poland in 1939), the Jews were obliged to wear marks — Stars of David, with which they were marked for damnation.

Marxist ideology denoted the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as two opposite poles. Even though Marx had a strong repulsion for moral judgments, he himself could not avoid them. In his system, in the guise of science, the proletariat became the absolute good and collective figure of the Savior, and the bourgeoisie on the other side, the absolute evil — the Antichrist, that will be erased from the face of the earth in the course of historical law.[18] According to Marx, the victory of the working class is a historical necessity that human beings cannot alter, but they can hasten the process and "shorten birth pangs", which is precisely the Communist aim and task.[19] While in the frames of original Marxism, the doomed are people from the entire class of the bourgeoisie; in Lenin's and Stalin's regimes, the doomed became "the enemy of the people". As Hannah Arendt points out, this is significant for totalitarian regimes, which try not only to destroy their enemies and suspected enemies, but in

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17 Rohrwasser, Michael: Religious and ecclesiastical structures in Communism and National Socialism, and the role of the writer, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 337.

18 See Löwith, Karl: Meaning in History, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2004, 44–45.

19 Rohrwasser, Michael: Religious and ecclesiastical structures in Communism and National Socialism, and the role of the writer, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 338–339.

their mature phase determine their enemies arbitrarily. The terror is not merely the means, but the essence of the movement, in which enemies are necessary.[20] Communist and Nazi judgment of the people is not made "according to what they had done", but arbitrarily, with the intention of maintaining terror, human ruthlessness, and fear.

In totalitarian rule also fear lost its specific role. Fear in principle makes human beings more careful, forces them to avoid some dangers and encourages them to withdraw from delicate situations. In these kind of regimes, in which terror is present all the time and is neither linked to specific actions nor predictable, fear spreads and extends, but is not a guaranty for safe retreat: "Under conditions of total terror not even fear can any longer serve as a guide for how to behave, because terror chooses its victims without reference to individual actions or thoughts, exclusively in accordance with the objective necessity of the natural or historical process. Under totalitarian conditions, fear probably is more widespread than ever before; but fear has lost its practical usefulness when actions guided by it can no longer help to avoid the dangers man fears."[21] But continuous maintaining of fear and uncertainty is the main task of terror, without it totalitarian regimes couldn't exist: "If you want to intimidate an entire nation, it is necessary that the number of victims rises in astronomic numbers and that in every house some residents are liquidated. The remaining residents, houses, streets, cities — everywhere that liquidations happened — will be perfect citizens for the rest of their lives. But you shouldn't forget new generations who will not believe their fathers, so the liquidations must be renewed all the time."[22] The feeling of constant threat, the spreading of fear, and the feeling of loneliness in totalitarian regimes occur in extremes. People in totalitarianism are destined only for two possible roles, the role of victim or the role of perpetrator, for which they are prepared through the ideology formed by the regime.[23] Because anyone could be in one role or another, one's closest can become enemies; your informant could be your neighbour, family member, friend or stranger. The regime must maintain terror all the time, because any form of stabilization would mean the end of totalitarianism, which is only able to preserve itself in the form of constant movement and continuous terror. But totalitarian terror is not only external, it

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20   The Slovenian case of the necessity for totalitarianism (communism, its revolution, terror and power), to have enemies is expressed by Aleš Bebler to CCCrtomir Nagode (and was also the position of the Communist Party): "The White Guard has to exist because we need it. If clericals will not create it, we will have to organize it ourselves." Vode, Angela: Skriti spomin, Ljubljana: Nova revija 2005, 70.

21   Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism, London: G. Allen & Unwin 1962, 467.

22   Mandeljštam, Nadežda: Strah i nada, Zagreb: Znanje 1978. Quoted by: Simoniti, Vasko: Permanentna revolucija, totalitarizem, strah, in: Jančar, Drago (ed.): Temna stran meseca, Ljubljana: Nova revija 1998, 24–36.

23   Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism, London: G. Allen & Unwin 1962, 468.

is internal. Totalitarian ideology is designed to prepare human beings to allow totalitarian ideological logics to replace his/her own logical thinking and undermine his/her internal freedom, therefore, creating internal terror over him/her.[24]

3.3 Punishment

The form of punishment in totalitarian regimes that befall the doomed only intensifies the present fear and uncertainty, especially because it is not possible to understand it in the beginning. The punishment is not only exile or death, but complete degradation and eradication of persons. Hannah Arendt compares only Nazi concentration camps with hell. But the comparison of Soviet gulags, Yugoslavian concentration and labor camps, and other Communist camps could also be made. In all mentioned types of camps, before physical murder actually happens, destruction and annihilation of human beings on three levels is taking place. Firstly, the juridical dimension of personhood (civil rights and reasoning) is destroyed, followed by the destruction of morality, and in the end, his/her individuality and all signs of his/her existence are destroyed.[25] The most protected secret and, under normal circumstances, also the most incomprehensible secret, is this process of humiliation, destruction and annihilation. This terror doesn't just mean killing and torturing, but total removal from the face of the earth, for which the metaphor of the "lake of fire" could be appropriate. This planned total destruction and devaluation of human beings is one of the most important elements. In Hannah Arendt's opinion, this differentiates totalitarian regimes from all regimes that are in other ways similar to totalitarianisms (tyrannies, authoritarian regimes, theocracies, etc.).

3.4 New world and new human

The attempt at the creation of a new world will be completely opposite to the existing world, and the new human that will be formed by the regime — according to ideological aims — is in Hannah Arendt's and Waldemar Gurian's opinion[26] the fundamental element of totalitarian regimes. In Nazism, the new world is considered a world of Aryan race domination, where the right to

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24   Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism, London: G. Allen & Unwin 1962, 473.

25   Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism, London: G. Allen & Unwin 1962, 446–456. Such were the efforts as well of KPJ and OZNA/UDV regarding people (the ones that did not fit the momentary direction of the regime) killed between and after the war.

26   See Hürten, Heinz: Waldemar Gurian and the development of the concept of totalitarianism, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): Totalitarianism and political religions. Vol. 1. Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships, London, New York: Routledge 2004, 42–52, mostly 49–51.

live is reserved only for perfect people, super–humans (according to Nazi standards), who are acting completely according to regime laws. In Communism, only one class exists within the new world and only one type of human being — communist, who should be without a private life and totally devoted to society and Party. Alfa and Omega in the totalitarian new world is the regime itself, not a person (as for example in the Book of Revelation or some other apocalyptic literature, in which God is in the centre and God is a person *par excellence*), and that is why the person becomes superfluous, humiliated and an instrument solely for the preservation of the regime. Totalitarianism violates the most basic values, virtues and principles of individualism; in totalitarian systems the most extreme form of instrumentalism and misuse of the person as an instrument is the means for ensuring that their ideological aims prevail. In the ideology of totalitarian regimes, it is not only transcendence and God that are removed, but also the human person, the human as an irreplaceable, unpredictable, spontaneous being, capable of free thinking and decision–making.

Totalitarian leaders and ideologues failed to create a new earth and a new human being despite all their efforts and prophecies. The Nazi vision of the domination of the Aryan race and the communist vision of the end of history in proletarian Eden has collapsed because their terror was not only radical, but also self–destructive. The totalitarian version of the apocalypse created only unlimited options of destruction and inhumanity and nothing like an earthly paradise. The ashes of radical ideas can perhaps at least remind us that people cannot create paradise on Earth, even for the strongest, the wisest, or the most "paradise–worthy" type of people.

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