

**COMPARING REPRESSION POLICIES IN TOTALITARIAN REGIMES: THE
SOVIET UNION AND NAZI GERMANY**

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Abstract: This article presents a comparative analysis of the repression policies employed by two of the most infamous totalitarian regimes of the 20th century: the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin and Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. Both regimes utilized systematic terror, mass arrests, forced labor camps, and executions to consolidate power and eliminate opposition. Despite ideological differences—communism versus fascism—both states relied on similar mechanisms of control, including secret police, propaganda, and the criminalization of dissent. The study explores key similarities and differences in their repression strategies, their impact on society, and the long-term historical consequences.

Keywords: totalitarianism, political repression, Stalinism, Nazism, Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, gulag, concentration camps, mass terror.

The 20th century witnessed the rise of totalitarian regimes that reshaped the political, social, and moral landscapes of entire nations. Among the most prominent examples were the Soviet Union under Stalin and Nazi Germany under Hitler. While driven by opposing ideologies—Marxist-Leninist socialism and racial-nationalist fascism—both regimes implemented brutal policies to silence dissent, eliminate perceived enemies, and enforce ideological conformity.

Repression in these regimes was not incidental but a fundamental element of governance. It was embedded in legal systems, institutionalized through state apparatuses like the NKVD and the Gestapo, and justified through elaborate propaganda campaigns. These regimes constructed enemies both real and imagined, turning internal purges and external conquests into tools of political survival and expansion.

This paper investigates how Stalinist and Nazi repression policies functioned, comparing their methods, targets, and ideological motivations. By focusing on structural similarities and contextual differences, the article sheds light on how totalitarianism sustains itself through fear, surveillance, and systematic violence.

The research applies a comparative historical analysis, using:

- **Primary sources:** Archival records, official speeches, secret police reports (NKVD, Gestapo), and legal decrees;
- **Secondary literature:** Scholarly works on totalitarianism, biographies of victims, and political science theory (Arendt, Friedrich & Brzezinski);
- **Case studies:** Purges of the Soviet intelligentsia (Great Terror, 1937–38) and Nazi persecution of Jews, political opponents, and dissidents;
- **Conceptual framework:** Based on totalitarian theory, state terror, and ideological state apparatus models.

State Terror as a Tool of Power: Both regimes institutionalized terror. Stalin used the NKVD and show trials to eliminate political rivals and perceived “enemies of the people,” while Hitler’s regime employed the Gestapo and SS to persecute Jews, Communists, trade unionists, and others.

Use of Concentration and Labor Camps: The Soviet gulag and Nazi concentration camps functioned similarly as spaces for punishment, forced labor, and death. However, while gulags were primarily punitive and economic in nature, Nazi camps, especially extermination camps, had a genocidal purpose.

Ideological Justification: Stalin’s repression was framed around class struggle and counter-revolutionary threats, while Hitler’s was based on racial purity and anti-Semitism. Each regime demonized specific groups: kulaks and "Trotskyites" in the USSR, Jews and Slavs in Nazi Germany.

Propaganda and Cult of Personality: Both systems heavily relied on propaganda. Stalin and Hitler were portrayed as infallible leaders, and repression was justified as necessary for national unity and survival.

Impact on Society: Fear permeated everyday life. Citizens were encouraged to denounce neighbors and even family members. Public trust was shattered, and intellectual, cultural, and spiritual life was suffocated.

Despite their ideological opposition, Stalinism and Nazism shared striking similarities in their mechanisms of repression. Both regimes viewed dissent as existentially dangerous and sought to prevent it through pervasive surveillance and violent coercion. The regimes criminalized thought, restricted personal freedoms, and used legal frameworks to justify extrajudicial killings and arbitrary imprisonment.

However, key differences also emerge. Stalin’s terror was largely inward-focused, aimed at purging internal enemies within the Communist Party and broader Soviet society. In contrast, Nazi repression combined domestic control with externally directed racial genocide. The Holocaust represents a distinct form of totalitarian repression aimed at the total eradication of an entire people—a policy with no equivalent in Stalinist practice, despite its mass brutality.

Another important distinction is the role of economic exploitation. The Soviet gulag system was designed, in part, to support industrialization through forced labor. Nazi camps, while also using forced labor, were more ideologically driven, particularly in their later genocidal function.

The legacy of repression differs as well. While Nazi Germany was dismantled after World War II, and its crimes internationally condemned, the Soviet Union continued for decades. In many post-Soviet states, historical reckoning remains incomplete, with memory politics still contested.

Stalinist and Nazi repression demonstrate how totalitarian regimes manipulate fear and ideology to maintain absolute control. Although shaped by different doctrines, their use of violence, surveillance, and propaganda reveals a shared architecture of oppression. The comparison underscores that totalitarianism is less about left or right ideologies and more about the concentration of unchecked power.

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Understanding these systems is essential not only for historical scholarship but for contemporary vigilance. As authoritarian tendencies re-emerge in various forms around the world, the lessons of the 20th century remind us that democracy, transparency, and human rights must never be taken for granted.

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