

# Profiles in Mass Murder



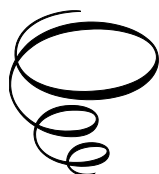
# Profiles in Mass Murder:

*Stalin, Hitler, and Mao*

By

Larry Ceplair

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Profiles in Mass Murder: Stalin, Hitler, and Mao

By Larry Ceplair

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To Christine, I can not imagine one more sublime



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# INTRODUCTION

When I compare [Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler], I see first a will to power which suffers no scruples, annihilates every enemy, knows no morality, mercy or chivalry. . . . [They share] three deep-seated habits: a small capacity for love, a great capacity for hate, and an eminent and unquenchable belief in themselves. [Stalin and Hitler share] a predominant passion for revenge.  
—Emil Ludwig<sup>1</sup>

But the lust for power never dies – men cannot have enough. No one will lift a hand to send it from his door, to give it warning “Power, never come again!”  
—Aeschylus<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to *ideology* the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions.  
—Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn<sup>3</sup>

My own feeling was that once a certain class of people has been placed by temporal and spiritual authorities outside the ranks of those whose life has value, then nothing comes more naturally to men than murder.  
—Simone Weil<sup>4</sup>

The great murderers of the twentieth century were not men driven by terrible passions, they were cynics who fomented and exploited the passions of others.  
—David Graeber<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Ludwig, *Three Portraits: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin* (New York and Toronto: Alliance Book Corporation, 1940), 125-26.

<sup>2</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, translated by Robert Fagels (New York: Penguin Classics, 1977), 158, 1355-59.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1:174.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*, translated by R. Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 175, quoted in Wolfram Eilenberger, *The Visionaries: Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, and Weil, and the Power of Philosophy in Dark Times*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 156.

<sup>5</sup> David Graeber, *The Ultimate Hidden Truth of the World . . . Essays*, edited by Nika Dubrovsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 143.

A few years ago, while visiting Tibet, I was stunned by the number of police and army checkpoints and the constant warnings not to discuss the Dalai Lama or bring pictures of him into the country. Why, I wondered, did the world's second-most powerful country fear an octogenarian advocate of nonviolent resistance? As I began searching for an answer to this question, another one emerged: Why do seemingly impregnable regimes treat any form of dissent, resistance, or opposition as anathema and respond to it with immediate, deadly violence? Was this a state- or leader-determined phenomenon? The more I thought about it, the broader my inquiry became, to include two other extremely punitive regimes: the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler.<sup>6</sup> Because of what I had

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<sup>6</sup> There have been several books comparing Stalin and Hitler, but none comparing my three. See Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Richard J. Overy, *The Dictators: Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany* (New York: Norton, 2004); Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York: Knopf, 2007); Laurence Rees, *Hitler and Stalin: The Tyrants and the Second World War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012). Donald T. Critchlow's polemical and shallow comparison of "revolutionary monsters" does not include Hitler and Stalin (*Revolutionary Monsters: Five Men Who Turned Liberty into Tyranny* [Washington, D. C.: Regnery, 2022]). I have chosen not to include the other twentieth-century mass killings in German Southwest Africa, Armenia, Cambodia, and Rwanda, because the decisions were made collectively. For the Herero/Namaqua, see Domonik J. Schaller and Moses A. Dirk, eds. *From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa* (Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2008). It should be noted, however, that under the nominal leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge killed a far greater percentage of Cambodians, over thirty percent, than the three under investigation in this book. For a very good analysis of the Khmer Rouge killing program, see Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996). For the Turkish program of genocide against the Armenians, see Taner Akçar, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, translated by Paul Bessemer (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006). For Rwanda, see Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with our Families* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). Similarly, the mass killings in early China, the Mongol slaughters, the war on the Irish by the forces of Oliver Cromwell, and the massacres of indigenous natives by colonializing peoples, are not covered. Finally, because it is so far removed from my time frame, I have not included, though in terms of intentional mass-murder, I certainly might have, Saddam Hussein's slaughter of Iraqi Kurds in 1988. See Human Rights Watch, "Whatever Happened to the Iraqi Kurds?," March 11, 1991, <https://www.hrw.org/report/1991/03/11/whatever-happened-iraqi-kurds#4>.

learned writing a comparative study of revolutions,<sup>7</sup> I focused on those who had made the decisions to kill and asked “Who were these men?” What were the sources of their murderous or callous policies? Did those policies stem from personal insecurity or paranoia? (Clearly, wielders of absolute power should be paranoid, but not necessarily in a clinical sense.) Did power breed fear and absolute power breed absolute fear? In sum, when and how did the anti-oppositional concerns of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao become synonymous with mass deaths? What were the tipping points that toppled them from autocrats to murderers? The short answers are: In Stalin’s case, it was the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 (“That could have been me”); for Hitler, it was the annexation of eastern Poland in 1939 (“Now I really have a Jewish problem”); for Mao it was the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (“If the revolution sputters and stalls, I die”).

The tipping point approach raises the question of aim or intention. When these men reached their tipping point, did they have a clear aim or goal in mind; did they, that is, act for a reason that the historian can discern and address? This is not an easy question to ask of impenetrable personalities, who lived in a sycophantic, stress- and tension-ridden world, enmeshed in complex systems. We can, however, speculate about their intentions.

Stalin intended, from the outset of the Bolshevik Revolution, to kill kulaks or counterrevolutionaries. Though he did so relatively freely during the civil war, he faced definite constraints and had to curtail that intent for a full decade. Beginning in 1929, when many of the constraints had been removed, he did not intend to kill the kulaks (rather to destroy them as a class), nor to unleash a famine (rather to collectivize agriculture), nor to murder his opponents and critics (rather to silence them). The power he came to wield in the 1930s and timely circumstances – the assassination of Kirov and the Spanish Civil War – tipped the balance, and, from 1934 to 1938, he planned to kill as many “enemies” as the security apparatus could arrest. What brought his intention to an end, in 1938, remains an unanswered question.

Hitler did not, until 1939, intend to kill millions of Jews, Slavs, and other “lower” racial types. Until then, the Third Reich contained several hundreds of thousands of Jews, whom he intended to degrade and eliminate from

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Revolutionary Pairs: Marx and Engels; Lenin and Trotsky; Gandhi and Nehru; Mao and Zhou; Castro and Guevara* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020).

Germany proper. His intention to annihilate was the product of the type of war he deliberately started in 1939. It brought millions of Jews under German control and targeted, first and foremost, the lowly Slavs. From the viciousness of the war he deliberately unleashed against the Slavs, it was but a small step to the deliberate annihilation of the Jews.

Mao never harbored an intention to kill millions of Chinese people. Their deaths were the massive collateral damage attendant to his intent to maintain, at all costs, the dynamic of the Chinese revolution, to ceaselessly confront and eliminate its “opponents” and its contradictions.

Those historians who track mass murders divide on whether the twentieth century examples are on a continuum with or distinct from mass killings of the past. Eric D. Weitz sees two additional factors that emerged in the twentieth century: the hegemony of race thinking in the West and the seizure of state power by revolutionary movements. These factors, in different ways, created new and deadlier syntheses of warfare and ideology.<sup>8</sup> Ben Kiernan sees a slightly different conjunction affecting the People’s Republic of China, locating its mass killing as the result of “the combined weight of peasant Communism, forced industrialization, and Stalinist centralization.”<sup>9</sup> From my perspective, these causes are too impersonal; they do not take into account the appearance of new personality types.

With that in mind, I have undertaken an in-depth examination of each country and leader. I have not systematically tried to compare the structural elements of the regimes, nor have I constructed a general, totalistic or

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<sup>8</sup> Eric D. Weitz, “The Modernity of Genocides: War, Race, and Revolution in the Twentieth Century,” in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 514. R. J. Rummel calls the twentieth century “death by government” or “democide.” And he lists the Soviet Union (61,911,000 deaths), the People’s Republic of China (35,236,000), and the Third Reich (20,946,000) as the three greatest “megamurderers.” *Death by Government: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 1, 4. See also his *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder since 1917* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990); *China’s Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1991); and *Genocide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

psychological model. Rather, I have used a biographical approach, placing each leader in the context of his respective history, revolutionary dynamic, cohort group, and world situation. I have tried to match their personalities with the historical context in which they functioned, seeking the interplay of psychological and historical forces.

Though the logic of self-defense and a built-in antipathy toward opposition is inherent to every political system, the Soviet Union under Stalin, the Third Reich under Hitler, and the People's Republic of China under Mao magnified them to a stunning degree. For them, the post-revolutionary oppositions were endowed with a power (number of adherents, disruptive potential) these oppositions never in fact enjoyed. To be sure, resistance to (or at least criticism of) all these regimes did exist, but the resisters were few and lacking influence. They never constituted an actual threat. Nevertheless, raising the "enemies-of-the-people" standard served as a rational means to three ends: It shifted attention from the system's failures, inconsistencies, contradictions, and lies; it mobilized the citizenry; and it promoted obedience. Obedience, in Vassily Grossman's estimation, was one of the most astonishing human traits that came to light during the first half of the twentieth century.

And it wasn't merely tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands [of victims], but hundreds of millions of people who were the obedient witnesses of this slaughter of the innocent. Nor were they merely obedient witnesses: when ordered to, they gave their support to this slaughter . . . . The extreme violence of totalitarian social systems proved able to paralyse the human spirit throughout whole continents.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein, Karl Popper noted: "so long as one man cannot accumulate enough physical power in his hands to dominate all others, just so long must he depend upon his helpers. Even the most powerful tyrant depends upon his secret police, his henchmen, and his hangmen."<sup>11</sup>

A good start to the problems I have noted above is to borrow some of the concepts provided by Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, particularly the conspiratorial and terrorist histories of the revolutionary parties. Though her main template is Nazism, into which she plugs, where she can, the Soviet experience, and though she wrote it before the Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> Vassily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, translated by Robert Chandler (New York: New York Review of Books, 1985), 214-15.

<sup>11</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 121-22.

system had become well known, much of what she wrote is applicable to the theme of this book. Soviet, Nazi, and Maoist ideologies envisioned the creation of mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals, which had to be totally dominated both to maintain the revolutionary thrust and to block the conspiracies that threatened to undermine the revolution. The conspiratorial conditioning of all three men laid the groundwork for their demand for total loyalty by the parties they controlled and the masses they claimed to represent. Therefore, as soon as the Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Chinese Communists took power, they replaced propaganda with indoctrination and employed “violence not so much to frighten people . . . as to realize constantly its ideal doctrines and practical lies.”<sup>12</sup>

Terror and mass purges were the sine qua non of these governments. Their methods were arbitrary and unpredictable in their choices of individual victims, though they usually had a clear rationale for its victim classes. Zbigniew Brzezinski has offered a useful distinction between purges and terrors in totalitarian systems, albeit one that does not diminish the viciousness of either. A purge “is meant to cleanse the party . . . [and] restore its vigor and monolithic unity.” It is designed to eliminate real or imagined enemies. Whereas terror is aimed at remaking an entire society. His analysis, however, is confined to the post-World War II Eastern European countries; he does not mention China.<sup>13</sup> In any case, all three regimes employed both methods.

All three men used terror to shape the type of human being they intended to shape. Terror, however, is a blunt instrument; it is indiscriminate – it turns against friends as well as enemies; it is used to rule perfectly obedient people, no matter what they may or may not have done, because nothing they have done or omitted to do had any connection with their fate. Every person had to be reshaped into a homo sovieticus, homo aryanus, or homo sinicus. (To be sure, under the Third Reich, Jews could not be so molded, and the terror launched against them – the Holocaust – was genocidal in scope. Hitler used purges against a small number of Nazis, and he molded Germans via propaganda and restrictive laws.)

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1976), 341.

<sup>13</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Pattern of Political Purges,” *The Annals of the American Academy*, CCCXVII (May 1959), 80.

Terror could never achieve its goal, but it did provoke unhappiness and dissent, which, in turn, required more terror.<sup>14</sup> In other words, everyone was always a suspect, and all crimes were always possible. Once a conspiracy was identified, its participants had to be exposed and eliminated. Terror, thus, grew from being a temporary means of eliminating “real” enemies, to a permanent hunt for conjured-up enemies. Of course, this presented a permanent paradox: the promise of a stable utopia required permanent instability.

The leaders of these regimes isolated themselves from uncomfortable information, proved blind to the systemic problems that provoked crises, harbored constant suspicion, and undertook increasing, and unsuccessful, efforts to eliminate the causes of those suspicions. The leaders found themselves in a position where they had to use their absolute power to retain it. Failures could not be attributed to the system, the leaders, or the ideology; they had to be the result of “complacency, inefficiency, and, worst of all, hostility.” Abram Tertz captured this paradox well: “So that prisons could vanish forever, we built new prisons. So that all frontiers should fall, we surround ourselves with a Chinese wall. So that work should become a rest and a pleasure, we introduced forced labor. So that not one drop of blood should be shed any more, we killed and killed and killed.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, even ideology had to give way to the regime’s sheer survival – violence and terror became its *raison d’état*. In Vladimir Putin’s Russia, as noted by Masha Gessen, ideology is used to explain away the entire world and hermetically seal every citizen inside it, such that what occurs inside feels ordinary.<sup>16</sup>

For all three men, ideology was a determinant, a construct, and an instrument. It gave them, in the words of Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, the social theory that made their acts “seem good instead of bad,” in their own eyes and those of others.<sup>17</sup> Or, as Bernard Lepetit has noted, it provided them with a set of reference points in which to situate them, a context

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 362, 420, 425.

<sup>15</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1956), 14-18; Abram Tertz, “On Socialist Realism,” trans. George Dennis, *Dissent* (Winter 1960), 45, quoted in Duncan White, *Cold Warriors: Writers Who Waged the Literary Cold War* (New York: Custom House, 2019), 506.

<sup>16</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarian Government Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 99.

<sup>17</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag*, I:174.

establishing appropriate tactics to utilize.<sup>18</sup> Their ideologies were not complex, nuanced, or sophisticated, and each was malleable; each underwent significant changes. Thus, Stalinism, Hitlerism, or Maoism never achieved the status of clear and consistent doctrine. In fact, Mary Midgley denies that Nazism contained a coherent, defensible set of principles. “The only part of it which carried real passionate conviction was emotional and destructive; it was the hatred of the Jews. This always remained constant, but almost every other element varied according to the audience addressed and the political opportunities of the moment.”<sup>19</sup> Arendt concurs. In her estimation, Hitler’s ideology was based on his idiosyncrasies and his personal domination – the *Führerprinzip*. The Nazis, Arendt writes, constructed a distinction between truth and falsehood, to fabricate as expedience required. This gave them a mercurial capacity to translate “every statement of fact into a declaration of purpose.” That is, they were cynical rather than dogmatic and everything became possible.<sup>20</sup> Only their quest to solve “the Jewish problem” was indelible. Marxism-Leninism, to which Stalin and Mao paid lip service did not provide a precise guide to what they would do, though it did place some constraints on them. Mao constantly retrofitted his ideology. In sum, though these men were not prisoners of the ideology they helped create, the citizens of their regimes were. Each ideology had its own official mode of speech, which signaled the best means of survival and maneuver within it. As George F. Kennan noted in the case of the Soviet Union, the leadership propounds, unpredictably, whatever Party line is useful to its cause at a particular moment. And “once a given party line has been laid down on a given issue of current policy, the whole Soviet governmental machine, including the mechanism of diplomacy, moves inexorably along the prescribed path, like a persistent toy automobile wound up and headed in a given direction,

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Lepetit, *Les formes de l'expérience: Une autre histoire sociale* (Paris: Alben Michel, 1995), 9-22.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 61-62. Richard A. Koenigsberg, in his very odd style of listing dozens of excerpts from Hitler’s books and speeches to make his points, believes he has uncovered a coherent ideology reflecting the coherence of an underlying fantasy. However, he confuses repetitive obsessions and fetishes with ideological consistency and coherence. *Hitler's Ideology: Embodied Metaphor, Fantasy, and History* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 387; Arendt, “Ideology and Terror,” [Colorado.edu/Origins/Class%20readings%20Hannah%20Arendt%20-%20Ideology%20and%20Terror.pdf](http://Colorado.edu/Origins/Class%20readings%20Hannah%20Arendt%20-%20Ideology%20and%20Terror.pdf); Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power*, translated by Herbert Arnold (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972).

stopping only when it meets with some unanswerable force.”<sup>21</sup> Should that occur, a new line is laid down and the process is re-enacted. Soviet, Communist German Nazi, and Chinese Communist ideologies ceased to represent the property of a social class or the masses but instead reflected the whims of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao.

The ideologies of the Bolshevik, Nazi, and Chinese Communist parties were also shaped by their histories: they all started out as very small groups that could have been annihilated innumerable times by innumerable contingencies. As a result, their sense of precariousness never ended. They sought absolute power, but not for its own sake. They wanted the power to radically remake their societies and peoples, and, once having gained that power, they made themselves into the sole expression of their peoples’ needs and desires.

Paradoxically, as their power increased, so too did their sense of danger. Since, in their minds, there was no such thing as too much power, increased danger accompanied their acquisition of power. And, as they wielded this power, they did not know where to stop. The drive to create the perfect society they promised became an unending, never-to-be completed, process to establish the perfect citizen for this perfect society, one who would never, ever be capable of backsliding. In 1924, Stalin said: “Our country stands like a huge rock surrounded by the ocean of bourgeois states. Wave after wave hurls itself against it, threatening to submerge it and sweep it away.” Nine years later, he stated: “We must bear in mind that the growth of the power of the Soviet state will intensify the resistance of the last remnants of the dying classes. It is precisely because they are dying . . . that they will go on from one form of attack to other sharper forms of attack.”<sup>22</sup> For Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, all advances against an enemy necessitated further advances, leading to the total liquidation of the enemy, leaving no remnant or trace. Until full victory (whatever that meant) was achieved, reversals were always possible, so not even the smallest doubt could be tolerated.<sup>23</sup> Opponents must be totally smashed physically and ideologically, unfavorable developments must be undone in their earliest manifestations, otherwise they would grow rapidly out of control. “A deviation,” Stalin said,

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<sup>21</sup> George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 1947.

[https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2017/BSS185/um/Week\\_4\\_Kennan\\_on\\_Containment.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2017/BSS185/um/Week_4_Kennan_on_Containment.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Nathan Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1953), 410, 414.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

“is the beginning of a mistake. Either we allow this development into a mistake to occur, which is very unfortunate, or else we nip it in the bud, and then the danger is diverted.” Mistakes and distortions must be “eliminated quickly and without a trace.”<sup>24</sup> The logic of struggle meant that every type of opposition will inevitably become progressively more extreme in aims and methods. There is no such thing as a benign or friendly opponent; no opposition can be persuaded by appeals to its conscience or interests.<sup>25</sup> No opponent will go quietly into the night. The logic of struggle against class or racial enemies is unlimited, breeding suspicions that can never be assuaged. No matter how powerless they may seem, these hated, demonized others, are, according to Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, quietly eating away at the foundations of their respective societies.

What characteristics did these men share? Were they intrinsically murderous, awaiting only the power to reveal it? If not, how did they acquire murderousness? When and why did they flip the switch from typical post-revolutionary retributions to all-out annihilations? When did they fully assume their political identity as potential despots? When did they decide to order or condone the killing of millions of their country people? Why did their killings reach their height only after all significant opposition had been eliminated or died out? Was there, in each case, what Yehuda Bauer calls a moral Rubicon?<sup>26</sup> These questions are important, because the respective personalities of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao clearly determined their policies. It is no accident that after the deaths of Stalin and Mao, though their regimes continued, state violence radically declined. The death of Hitler ended both the regime and the violence.

At this point, a reader may ask a pertinent question: Why include Mao? Is there not a wide gap on the continuum between systematic killers like Stalin and Hitler and one whose policies lead to mass deaths, a collateral-damage one like Mao? My short answer: “Mass deaths are mass deaths.” We do not need a ranking of degrees of intention to distinguish purveyors of mass killing. In the same vein, I believe the debate among a handful of Soviet scholars over the genocidal nature of some of Stalin’s killing is beside the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 451-52, 461-62.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*, updated version (Boston: Da Capo, 2014), 282.

point. How does it help our historical understanding of Stalinist Russia to label his mass killing other than mass killing?<sup>27</sup>

Of course, there are limits to what we can know about these men. As Lucien Goldmann noted: “While the biographer can discover whether the man he is studying did or did not perform a particular act at a particular moment . . . this gives him no information at all about the meaning such an act . . . had in his subject’s life.”<sup>28</sup> But he also notes, all lives have unity, continuity, coherence. It is the task of the biographer to discern that guiding thread. In the cases of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao it is their unremitting, all-consuming quest for the power to purify their society, to regenerate it by purging the defects, corruption, rot, and decay accumulated over the centuries of tsarist, liberal, and bourgeois rule.

In the following chapters, I will illuminate each man’s origins, his political identity, his rise to power, and his years in power. I will then compare the collectivization programs of Stalin and Mao, contrast the purges and cultural wars of all three, and examine the confrontation between Hitler and Stalin in the “Bloodlands” of World War II.

## On Comparisons

Charles Maier has, to my mind, provided the best words on this subject. He poses the pertinent questions: Are historical comparisons justified, what typologies are valid, and what common categories are discernible? He concludes that historians cannot renounce comparison, but that they can abuse if they do not recognize it and compensate for it. The test of a comparison “must be its relevance and explanatory power.” Comparative histories must also pinpoint that which is peculiarly unique to any one element. But, as Maier points out, uniqueness does not trump comparison. Insisting on a special nature of a particular mass-killing regime does not preclude comparison with other mass-killing regimes. Also, uniqueness should not be a mere matter of bookkeeping. It is estimated that the Stalinist regime was responsible for the deaths of some twenty million people; the

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<sup>27</sup> See Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); Mark Kramer, et al., “Perspectives on Norman Naimark’s *Stalin’s Genocides*,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, v. 14, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 149-89.

<sup>28</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, translated by Philip Thody (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 167.

National Socialist regime of perhaps eight million; the Chinese Communist regime of upwards of thirty-five million. Does that mean that National Socialism is in third place on the register of mass killing and the Khmer Rouge (1.7 million) a distant fourth? After all, similarity does not equal compatibility and genuine comparison requires uniqueness as much as similarity.<sup>29</sup>

The question arises: Should one, when confronting mass killings, accept the concept of a “singular” case, refusing to assess the killers on a moral level, or measure degrees of “evil”? Is Arnold J. Toynbee correct to state: “The absolute unique is, by definition, inapprehensible”?<sup>30</sup> The answer is no. Nothing is “absolutely unique,” no differences are absolute, and anything that can be perceived or conceived is apprehensible. Unique individuals may be compared because, no matter their distinctions, they share their humanness. Some observers, however, posit Hitler and the Holocaust as a singular case, one that is not comparable. Ian Kershaw, for example, argues for the uniqueness of Hitler’s message of salvation and redemption; his “charismatic authority,” when combined with the bureaucracy of a modern state and a nationalist, imperialist, anticommunist political culture, provoked unprecedented radicalism and destructiveness.<sup>31</sup> Surely, no other regime so radically bureaucratized the death process and so clearly identified its victims. To repeat, however, mass killing is mass killing, no matter the perpetrator, the methods, or the number of deaths. Mass killers can be located, if one is so inclined, on a continuum of immorality, with Hitler at one pole, Stalin somewhere in the middle, and Mao toward the other pole.

The usual comparisons are limited to the regimes of Stalin and Hitler, and Yehuda Bauer provides a useful continuum to compare them: Holocaust, genocide, and mass murder. They are all, he notes, “based on similar foundations and cannot ultimately be dealt with separately from each other.”<sup>32</sup> Peter Katz agrees, noting that “occasions of mass death differ,”

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3, 16, 17, 18, 54, 71, 83-84.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. XII, *Reconsiderations* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Kershaw, “Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, v. 39, no. 2 (September 1904), 246, 254-54.

<sup>32</sup> Yehuda Bauer, “Holocaust and Genocide: Some Comparisons,” in Peter Hayes, ed., *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 39.

because “ideological constraints operate upon the crucial mechanisms of state power to delimit and control the bloodshed that does occur.” Stalinist ideology aimed first at eliminating classes, and then, later, ethnicities, and, at first, preferred rehabilitation and re-education (via concentration camps) to killing. Under the *Führerprinzip*, however, all positive restraints gave way to the will of the Führer, and he had decided that the Jews must be annihilated.<sup>33</sup> Saul Friedländer concludes that the crimes of Stalin were “committed, at least on the face of it, in the name of a universal ideal, or, more precisely, the universal ideal was maintained as an explanation”; whereas the Nazis pursued a goal that cannot be explained by “higher, commonly understood ends.” They practiced “an amorality beyond all categories of evil.”<sup>34</sup> Other writers note the dissimilarity of the concentration camps: penal servitude and slave labor (in the Soviet Gulag) versus death, by overwork or gassing (in the German camps). In the Gulag, Katz writes, though death was massive, the focus was not on eliminating but on quotas. No group was singled out for harsher treatment.<sup>35</sup> In the People’s Republic, death was the unplanned result of poorly controlled radical upheavals. Thus, we are dealing with a wide spectrum, ranging from Holocaust (total physical annihilation of a specified group) to mass killing (of political opponents) to mass death. Only the first two were specifically orchestrated (by Hitler and Stalin, respectively).

## Similarities

The similarities of these men far outweigh their differences.

All were born and raised in obscurity. None traveled widely. Mao made only two trips out of China (both to Moscow); Hitler fought on the Western Front in WWI, and made very short visits to Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France (twice in 1940); Stalin traveled to a few Bolshevik meetings in Europe, met Lenin in Krakow, spent a few weeks in Switzerland, in 1912, and traveled to Tehran in 1943. All were well advanced in age when they arrived at the threshold of power, and their rise to power was not inevitable; it was a confluence of contingencies and cunning. Once in power, all were trusted by a vast majority of the citizenry, and all, in varying degrees, held the masses of their citizens in contempt

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Katz, “Ideology, State Power, and Mass Murder/Genocide,” *ibid.*, 47, 81, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Saul Friedländer, “The ‘Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Interpretation,” *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Katz, “Ideology,” 75.

(Hitler) or indifference (Stalin and Mao.) All were sworn enemies of organized religion.

They also shared a curious and interesting activity: all three were deeply influenced by books on heroism and banditry. For Stalin it was *The Patriot* (written by Alexander Kazbegi); for Hitler it was the cowboy novels of Karl May (e. g., *Winnetou*); for Mao it was *Water Margin* (written by Shi Nai'an)..

Personally, they were devious, insincere, unpredictable, enigmatic, haunted by morbidity, and unknowable, and they had no patience with complexity, perplexity, or insolubility. “What they have in common is a lack of scruple; this is their special characterological feature which facilitates their rise in society to an extraordinary degree – something not possible for ordinary criminals, because of limited intelligence, retentive capacity, education, or aptitude.”<sup>36</sup> But they were not “evil” men; they did not commit “evil” deeds; they were not clinically insane. They all intentionally perpetrated massive harm, which they justified as a “good” means to a “good” end. To their minds, deaths were abstractions, statistics. Each followed a peculiar, nonhuman logic or rationale.

They were revolutionaries, possessed of immoderate personalities and ideologies. All experienced violent early lives, were rebellious, square pegs in the round holes of their societies. All were born on the peripheries of national power and culture of the countries they came to control, “borderland figures,” in the words of Alfred J. Rieber.<sup>37</sup> Each traveled across different terrains: Stalin, from Georgian to Russian, peasant to proletarian, autodidact to “scholar” and “theorist”; Hitler, from Austrian to German, lower middle-class to national prominence, autodidact to demagogue; Mao, from Hunanese to Chinese, peasant to Communist Party and revolutionary leader, student to teacher and theorist.

All were self-created, to varying degrees. Stalin changed his name and regularly lied about his pre-revolutionary life. Hitler’s account of his pre-incarceration life is filled with untruths. Mao, once he achieved control of the Chinese Communist Party, rewrote its history and his role in it. Though each dreamed of himself as a great man of power, an incomparable leader,

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<sup>36</sup> N. P-----v, a Soviet biologist, quoted in Roy A. Medvedev, “New Pages from the Political Biography of Stalin,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York and London: Norton, 1977), 223.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Stalin: Man of the Borderlands,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 5 (December 2001), 1666.

Hitler dreamed more vastly – the greatest German of them all. All three believed in the power of their respective wills and its paramountcy. Each had a defining title, peculiar to him: *Vozhd* (Stalin), *Der Führer* (Hitler), Chairman (Mao). However, in terms of actual power wielded, Hitler stood alone. As Franz Neumann stated: “His power is legally and constitutionally unlimited; it is futile to attempt to describe it. A concept that is boundless cannot be rationally defined.”<sup>38</sup>

Firmly believing they inhabited a violent world, divided by irreconcilable ideologies, they could not imagine a society in which adherence or loyalty could be assured without the use of violence. Only a highly regimented, disciplined population could, in the cases of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic, ultimately defeat international capitalism; or, in the case of the Third Reich, defeat Jewish-controlled internationalism. All had plans: several five-year plans in the case of Stalin and Mao; one four-year in the case of Hitler. They were, in the words of Karl Schlögel, “not the ideas of madmen but halfway rational solutions to the problems of the age.”<sup>39</sup> In their drive to arrive at a rapid solution of the social and national questions, they had no compunction about sacrificing large numbers of people. Vyachaslav Molotov, long-time premier of the Soviet Union, wrote at the end of his life, reflecting on the Great Terror of 1937-38: “of course there were excesses, but all that was permissible, to my mind, for the sake of the main objective – keeping state power! . . . Our mistakes, including the crude mistakes, were justified.”<sup>40</sup> They were not what one could call flexible, but they were adaptive, ideologically, capable of “retreat” (Mao in 1959), “relaxation” (Stalin in 1934-35), postponement (Hitler in 1938), and vacillation (Mao during Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), but incapable of surrender.

Despite their enjoyment of broad popular support, none of the three felt secure. Though they demanded total loyalty, they trusted very few people, and believed that most people hid their true feelings. All, in one form or another, eliminated rivals. Stalin and Hitler trusted a very small coterie of vetted followers; Mao trusted no one. Many historians label these men as paranoid. Robert C. Tucker, for example, places Stalin and Hitler on what

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<sup>38</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944* (New York and Evanston, IL: Harper and Row, 1966), 84.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Schlögel, *The Soviet Century: Archaeology of a Lost World*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 146.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (New York and London: Norton, 2004), 217.

he calls the “paranoid spectrum, their paranoid personalities serving as powerful mediating factors in their dictatorial decision-making.<sup>41</sup> It seems to me that a “distrusting spectrum” would explain them better.

Though all three faced real problems, requiring radical solutions, no specific cause (their backgrounds, their countries’ traditions, tendencies, ideas, and myths) led them to turn to or accept mass killing. Rather, it was their personal control over an authoritarian regime, their predisposition to violence, and their impatience with the laws of history they claimed to understand that gave them the power and the authority to practice mass violence to shorten the historical arc. They possessed, in the words of Perry Link, “an excessive zeal for shortcuts,” for leapfrogging history.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, they relied heavily on “history,” which they conceived as an inexorable force, leading to socialism, national destiny, or racial purity. Because they had convinced themselves that they understood “history,” they viewed themselves as transcendental personalities who must do for human beings what human beings cannot or will not do for themselves; who must construct the perfect society, the blueprint of which was (incoherently) known only to them. The driving force behind their work was not the idea of class struggle or racial purity but rather the irresistible force of the logical process that developed from these obsessions. In accordance with the laws of history, certain crimes will be committed, and the leader, knowing the laws of history and the motives of criminal political behavior, must punish criminals in a punitive manner.<sup>43</sup> “What I do”, the respective inner voices of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao said, “is fully justified by the goal I seek.” For Hitler, of course, “pure blood” was the secret of life. All people were tainted with the “ailment of mixed, corrupted blood,” and they had to “purify themselves and make atonement.” He regularly ranted about Jews as “vermin,” “parasites,” “spiders,” and “leeches.” Though Stalin and Mao did not emphasize racial or ethnic purity, they did focus on the purity of Communist Party members. Stalin often used “decay” to refer to ideological shortcomings. Mao, in 1945, said: “We must be pure in organization . . . [W]e must have a Party with discipline, ideological purity, and organizational purity.”<sup>44</sup> They seemed to believe that a purified Party would

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<sup>41</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalinist Change*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1971), 30.

<sup>42</sup> Perry Link “The CCP’s Culture of Fear,” *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 2021, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 384-85, 387.

<sup>44</sup> Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on His Real Aims* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939), 228; Mao,

lead to a purified state and impregnable national security. But, as it turned out, their attempts to forge new human beings via education resembled not a vast classroom but a giant garbage disposal, crushing old lives and people. They were, that is, utopians who created dystopias. The dystopias were distinctively based: that of the Nazis on annihilation, that of the Soviets on mass political killing and famine, and that of the Chinese on rectification, famine, and massive social disorder.

All three harbored visions of a Soviet, Aryan, Chinese community, united around themselves as emblems of social unity. That is, they did not seek power for its own sake. They were, however, impatient with any limits placed on their exercise of power. Power to them was, to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, as great a possibility as could be imagined.<sup>45</sup> They envisioned themselves as engineers of human souls, employing the state to mold a new type of human being: homo sovieticus, homo aryanus, homo sinicus, but none thought of humans as humans. They only conceived of them as abstractions: classes (proletariat, bourgeoisie, peasants, kulaks, etc.), or masses, or *Volk* (and non-*Volk*). The masses were clay, to be molded. Stalin wanted to create a superior form of human existence based on a “New Soviet Person.” Hitler dreamed of an elite Aryan race. His new man would be “slender and supple, swift as a greyhound, tough as leather and hard as Krupp steel.” Like Myron’s Discus Thrower, the new man would epitomize the “sanctity of beauty” and provide a glimpse of the divine in the human. Mao called on the proletariat to eliminate *the “four olds” (ideas, culture, customs, and habits)*, and use its “new thinking, new culture, new customs, and new habits to change the entire face of society.”<sup>46</sup>

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“The Current Situation and Other Problems, February 15, 1945, Stuart R. Schram and Timothy Cheek, eds., *Mao’s Road to Power: From Rectification to Coalition Government, 1942-July 1945* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), VIII:715. However, as Steven Englund has pointed out to me, the insistence on pure blood is of a different quality, more fabulist, than class-based purges. It cannot purify and thus must eliminate entire ethnic groups, Jews, Romani, Slavs, and other inferior races. Email, August 20, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis, IN and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, II:20, 169.

<sup>46</sup> Frederic Spottiswood, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (Woodstock and New York: Overlook Press, 2003), 109; Joseph Stalin, “Speech at home of Maxim Gorky”, 26 October 1932; Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Table Talk, 1941-1944: His Private Conversations*, translated by Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2000), 8, 624; Mao, “The Sixteen Articles,” August 1966., quoted in Yang Jisheng, *The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural*

All proclaimed themselves adherents of an ideology, but their ideologies were hybrids. None were original thinkers. All were repetitive in their writings and speeches. Stalin and Mao, who prided themselves on their teaching vocation, were pedantic and catechistic in their lessons. Stalin and Mao claimed to strictly follow Marxist-Leninist precepts, but they radically altered the theory and added their own practices. They were skeletal Marxist-Leninists, lacking humanist organs.<sup>47</sup> Hitler cobbled his *Weltanschauung* together from a variety of German ideas, scientific racism, and German nationalism. All claimed sole power to interpret their respective ideologies. In that sense, they were all ideocrats, who nevertheless proclaimed themselves advocates of a perverse, Orwellian, view of “freedom.” Their ideologies were necessary but not sufficient causes of their deeds. All three personalized their ideologies as a means of promoting their authority: Stalin and Mao, via, respectively, “socialism in one country” (1924) and the “Chinese road to socialism” (1956); Hitler via the *Führerprinzip*.

Each had an -ism or -ist attached to his name. But what did those terms mean? In each case they stood for a compilation of expressed ideas, many of which remained nominal, and preferred methods. In the end, though, what they believed is secondary to what they did. And they all had in common the drive for a monolithic state imposed on a monolithic society. For Stalin and Mao, the paramount question was: “How do I convince people to act in a rational, revolutionary manner?” Hitler focused on manipulating the irrational.

In their governing styles, they all, in Ian Kershaw’s words, “made *total* claims upon society, based upon a monopolistic set of ideological imperatives and resulting in unprecedented levels of repression and attempted indoctrination, manipulation and mobilization.”<sup>48</sup> They single-

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*Revolution*, translated by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 121.

<sup>47</sup> I will abstain from participating in what I believe to be a jejune debate: Were Stalin and Mao true Marxists? They proclaimed themselves as such, and their speeches and writings constantly referred to the doctrine. For an eloquent example of the debate, see Leszek Kolakowski, “Marxist Roots of Stalinism” and Mihalo Marković, “Stalinism and Marxism,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York and London: Norton, 1977), 283-319.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Kershaw, “‘Working towards the Führer’: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” introduction to his *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem: International Institute for Holocaust Research and New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 2008), 29-30.

mindedly sought the radical transformation and modernization of their respective countries. Stalin intended to advance the socialist revolution; Hitler to free Germany from the effects of World War I and international Jewry and restore its grandeur; Mao to revolutionize China and restore its status as the Middle Kingdom. They projected a highly personalized leadership style, and they shaped the world in which they lived in a distinctive, individual manner. Their decision-making process was unpredictable, even chaotic. Their whims, especially Mao's, became costly state policies. Though they concentrated power in their hands, they could not, of course, do or oversee every aspect. All had to find means of dispersing power in a manner that did not threaten their own. Each developed a divide-and-control manner of governance.

All relied on personality cults, which served a dual purpose: ego boosting and politically unifying. Each had a popular title: *Vozhd* (Stalin), *Der Führer* (Hitler), the Chairman (Mao). Though all three, in varying degrees, fostered these cults, Stalin did not devote significant time to cultivating his, whereas Hitler, from the outset, and Mao, from 1945, made it intrinsic to their leadership style. Stalin's cult was a post-revolutionary construct and was not based on his popularity with the people. He used it to further secure his hold on power. Mao's cult grew from his leadership of a popular revolutionary movement and government. He used it in both the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as a significant element in his plans to remove the inequalities between classes. Distinct from both of the Communist cults, "the 'Hitler myth' was structurally indispensable to, in fact the very basis of and scarcely distinguishable from, the Nazi movement and its *Weltanschauung*."<sup>49</sup> While Stalin and Mao used their cults "coolly" as political instruments, not letting it turn their heads, Hitler "was not only the object but the earliest, most persistent and most passionate devotee" of his.<sup>50</sup> Toward the end of their lives, Stalin and Mao identified themselves with past tsars and emperors, and their personality cults drew heavily on the Russian and Chinese pasts.

Enemies, domestic and foreign, were essential to their longevity. All three raised the specter of mortal enemies, combat with which never could be allowed to flag. Thus, mass intimidation was a key component of their rule,

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<sup>49</sup> Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 174; Kershaw, "Working towards the Führer, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, translated by Ewald Opers (London: Phoenix, 1997), 7.

though none oversaw mass death until several years into their respective reigns. None believed in killing per se, but only as a tool of realizing their objectives. The killing propensity, when it did emerge, did not seem to be visceral, personal, or irrational. They did not revel in the cruelty they imposed. None visited the killing areas they authorized. All were indifferent to the human costs of their policies. They deliberately chose the policies that resulted in mass deaths, and those choices were not determined by inner demons or outer forces. The massive deaths in each regime were personally ordered, not systemically caused.

All three mass-death regimes fit Milton Himmelfarb's formula: "No Hitler, No Holocaust"<sup>51</sup> (no Stalin, no great famine and great terror; no Mao, no great famine, no cultural revolution). That is, despite the arguments of many historians, dysfunction and disorder in their regimes did not negate agency. These men willed and ordered or ignored mass deaths in their respective countries. But as Zygmunt Bauman noted, Hitler and Stalin differed from Mao. They needed a highly developed bureaucratic state, advanced technology, and modern, scientific methods to accomplish their ends. "[W]ithout modern civilization and its most essential achievements, there would be no Holocaust" and no mass purges.<sup>52</sup>

## Dissimilarities

They realized their unique value or vocation at differing times. Hitler came to his vocation around 1920, when he was in his early thirties. Mao possessed a strong sense of his leadership potential when he was twenty-seven. It came to Stalin in 1922, when he was forty-three. Hitler was in power for twelve years (the length of the Third Reich); Stalin for twenty-four (the Soviet Union lasted 74); and Mao for forty-one (his regime is still in power). In their climb to power, Mao alone controlled his destiny, taking the reins of the Party in 1935, leading it to victory over the Guomindang, and heading the revolutionary government for the remainder of his life. This endowed him with a unique stature. Hitler achieved that stature in 1933-34, but prior to that he was, like Stalin (1923-29), at the mercy of events and

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<sup>51</sup> Milton Himmelfarb, "No Hitler, No Holocaust," *Commentary*, 76:3 (Mar 1984), 37-43, [commentarymagazine.com/articles/Milton-himmelfarb-2/no-hitler-no-holocaust/](http://commentarymagazine.com/articles/Milton-himmelfarb-2/no-hitler-no-holocaust/). Raul Hilberg came to the same conclusion: without Hitler, the Holocaust "would have been inconceivable." *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), ix.

<sup>52</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 87, 90.

other people. Of the three, only Mao was indigenous. Stalin was a Georgian and Hitler was an Austrian. Stalin was the shortest (5' 5"), Mao the tallest (5' 10"). Hitler stood 5' 9". None, by any definition, was handsome. Stalin and Mao had voracious sexual appetites and several marriages each. Both fathered children. Hitler, however, did not seem to be sexual at all; he had few women in his life and only one constant companion. He had no children. He reputedly had one great love, his niece, Geli Raubal, who committed suicide in 1931. None could be designated as family oriented. Hitler and Mao ignored their blood relations; Stalin held himself aloof from them.

Stalin was by far the cruelest. He ordered arrests, closely followed investigations, interrogated some prisoners, and occasionally gave orders about what kind of torture to use.<sup>53</sup> Whereas Hitler did not visit the myriad camps established under his regime nor did he inquire into the details of the killings. Operations were assigned to Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, and Adolf Eichmann. Mao also kept his distance from the intricacies and victims of his rectification programs and the deaths caused by his Great Leap Forward. He rarely, according to Philip Short, "gave direct instructions for the killing of an opponent, but he saw their physical removal as a necessary outcome of revolutions."<sup>54</sup> Only the Hitler regime targeted specific groups for physical annihilation. Stalin targeted various ethnic groups for deportation. Mao periodically targeted intellectuals, counterrevolutionaries, and bureaucrats for rectification. Neither of the Communist regimes established facilities for extermination or constructed an apparatus devoted to carrying out mass murder.<sup>55</sup> Show trials were peculiar to the Soviet Union.

Each man exhibited distinctively episodic methods of killing. Stalin, though he had killed as a young revolutionary in the Caucasus and during the civil war, did not become a dedicated hands-on killer until the mid-1930s. Before then, shortly after assuming full power, he decided to annihilate the kulaks as a class, via the enactment of brutal policies and methods. He remained indifferent to the mass deaths that resulted. Hitler killed by brutality via the unrestrained violence of the SS and SA during the 1920s. He ordered the killing on the Night of the Long Knives and directly authorized the Holocaust. Mao, however, evolved from a hands-on killer during the 1930s,

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<sup>53</sup> Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 195-96.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Short, *Mao: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 631.

<sup>55</sup> Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 76, 77, 82.

to a killer via brutal policies and indifference (rectification, Great Leap Forward, and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution).

Theoretically, Stalin and Mao could have been removed by a vote of their respective central committees, and Stalin, during the period 1924-34, before achieving full power, had to devote his attention to maintaining a majority in the politburo and central committee. Hitler was the regime; he could not be removed without its collapse, and he struck only once against the NSDAP and quite narrowly in terms of deaths and displacements.

Although all three claimed to represent the wishes of the masses, each relied on a very different sort of mass: for the Bolsheviks, it was the workers and soldiers of Petrograd for one crucial year; for the Nazis, the masses were those enrolled in the SA (Sturmabteilung or Brown Shirts) and the attendees of the party's rallies; for the Chinese Communists, it was first the peasants and then the students, but ultimately the Red Army. Of the three, only Mao, at least nominally, had a high opinion of the potential of the masses. Hitler despised the German masses. He called them "ponderous and slothful," lacking a revolutionary temperament. They "must be driven to their greatness or they will fall back into timid renunciation." The "inert" mass is "doomed to decay and self-deception"; it is "the sum total of the sinking civilization and of its dying representatives."<sup>56</sup> For Stalin, they were fodder for his agricultural, industrial, and military plans.

Governing for Hitler was significantly easier. Unlike the other two, he relied almost completely on his intuition. He did not, that is, concern himself with details and he eschewed meetings. In addition, he took over a functioning administrative apparatus, economy, and society; he intended only to revolutionize German culture. The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Communists had to build a new governing apparatus and rebuild a war-devastated economy and society. Stalin headed the Soviet Communist Party from 1922-53, but he did not hold any state offices until 1941, when he became Chairman of the Council of Commissars. Hitler held the highest possible office in Germany, a fusion of chancellor and president. Mao was the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (1943-76) and head of state (1949-59). Though all three countries had formal constitutional structures, only Germany retained its pre-Nazi one. Hitler used it when it suited him and bypassed it with laws and edicts when it did not. Stalin and Mao oversaw the promulgation of constitutions but paid no heed to them. Hitler and Stalin constructed a sycophantic leadership cohort, while Mao preferred

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<sup>56</sup> Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, 114, 115, 229.