

Topic Page: [Dictatorship](#)

Definition: **dictatorship** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Absolute rule without the consent of the governed. In many modern dictatorships, all power resides in the dictator, with representative democracy abolished or existing as mere formality. Personal freedom is severely limited, censorship is generally enforced, education is tightly controlled, and legal restraints on governmental authority are abolished.

Summary Article: **dictatorship**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Term or office of an absolute ruler, overriding the constitution. (In ancient Rome a dictator was a magistrate invested with emergency powers for six months.) Although dictatorships were common in Latin America during the 19th century, the only European example during this period was the rule of Napoleon III. The crises following World War I produced many dictatorships, including the regimes of Atatürk and Piłsudski (nationalist); Mussolini, Hitler, Primo de Rivera, Franco, and Salazar (all right-wing); and Stalin (communist). The most notable contemporary dictatorship is that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Roman origins A dictator was originally an extraordinary magistrate of the Roman republic, whose office was created (traditionally in 501 BC) to deal with situations which could not be safely entrusted to the consuls with their divided authority. Nominated by the Senate, his *imperium*, an absolute and unlimited although temporary power, was confirmed by the *comitia curiata* (see *comitia*); and all other magistrates were his subordinates. He was attended by 24 lictors, who, at least in the early period, bore the fasces with axes even inside the walls of Rome. The latter privilege emphasized the dictator's power of life and death; but that power was circumscribed in 300 BC by the *Lex Valeria*, which made it subject to right of appeal (*provocatio*) within the city boundaries. The main purposes of dictatorship were (1) to handle a military crisis, during which, however, the dictator's authority was limited to Italy; (2) to put down civil strife; (3) to exercise criminal jurisdiction. In any of these cases he held office for six months.

After 216 BC, during the Second Punic War, we find several innovations, for example, election of a dictator by the people, and his command of an army outside Italy. A dictator might also be appointed to perform such minor functions as holding elections, celebrating games, or exercising religious rites. In these cases he retired as soon as the duty was fulfilled. The Roman dictatorship in its true character, as described above, must be distinguished from the so-called dictatorships of the late republic. That of Sulla was a provisional government, that of Caesar a temporary monarchy; and it was in order to prevent its further use for such purposes that it was abolished by law in 44 BC.

Modern examples In later times the titles and powers of dictators have been seized by usurpers and the heads of revolutionary movements, notably in the South American states, in Haiti, San Domingo, and Mexico. In Europe the political scene between the World Wars was characterized by the opposition between the democracies and the dictators, at least by defenders of the former. Of the latter, only Mussolini adopted the ancient Roman rhetoric. Hitler's Nazism developed its indigenous vocabulary, whilst in the USSR the Bolsheviks claimed to be a 'people's democracy'.

As a term of political analysis the word 'dictator' has now hardly any value owing to its wholly

derogatory overtones and lack of precision.

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