

Topic Page: [Totalitarianism](#)

Definition: **totalitarianism** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1926) **1** : centralized control by an autocratic authority **2** : the political concept that the citizen should be totally subject to an absolute state authority



Image from: [A woman worker at a textile plant in the late... in Encyclopedia of Politics](#)

Summary Article: **totalitarianism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(tōtăl'ītâr'ēñzəm), a modern autocratic government in which the state involves itself in all facets of society, including the daily life of its citizens. A totalitarian government seeks to control not only all economic and political matters but the attitudes, values, and beliefs of its population, erasing the distinction between state and society. The citizen's duty to the state becomes the primary concern of the community, and the goal of the state is the replacement of existing society with a perfect society.

Various totalitarian systems, however, have different ideological goals. For example, of the states most commonly described as totalitarian—the Soviet Union under Stalin, Nazi Germany, and the People's Republic of China under Mao—the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and China sought the universal fulfillment of humankind through the establishment of a classless society (see communism); German National Socialism, on the other hand, attempted to establish the superiority of the so-called Aryan race.

Characteristics

Despite the many differences among totalitarian states, they have several characteristics in common, of which the two most important are: the existence of an ideology that addresses all aspects of life and outlines means to attain the final goal, and a single mass party through which the people are mobilized to muster energy and support. The party is generally led by a dictator and, typically, participation in politics, especially voting, is compulsory. The party leadership maintains monopoly control over the governmental system, which includes the police, military, communications, and economic and education systems. Dissent is systematically suppressed and people terrorized by a secret police. Autocracies through the ages have attempted to exercise control over the lives of their subjects, by whatever means were available to them, including the use of secret police and military force. However, only with modern technology have governments acquired the means to control society; therefore, totalitarianism is, historically, a recent phenomenon.

By the 1960s there was a sharp decline in the concept's popularity among scholars. Subsequently, the decline in Soviet centralization after Stalin, research into Nazism revealing significant inefficiency and improvisation, and the Soviet collapse may have reduced the utility of the concept to that of an ideal or abstract type. In addition, constitutional democracy and totalitarianism, as forms of the modern state, share many characteristics. In both, those in authority have a monopoly on the use of the nation's military power and on certain forms of mass communication; and the suppression of dissent, especially during times of crisis, often occurs in democracies as well. Moreover, one-party systems are found in

some nontotalitarian states, as are government-controlled economies and dictators.

Causes

There is no single cause for the growth of totalitarian tendencies. There may be theoretical roots in the collectivist political theories of Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Karl Marx. But the emergence of totalitarian forms of government is probably more the result of specific historical forces. For example, the chaos that followed in the wake of World War I allowed or encouraged the establishment of totalitarian regimes in Russia, Italy, and Germany, while the sophistication of modern weapons and communications enabled them to extend and consolidate their power.

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