

*Nazism And Communism: Evil Twins?**

Stéphane Courtois, ed., *Le Livre Noir du Communisme* (Paris: Laffont, 1997).

The publication of this *Black Book* by a group of historians to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the October Revolution has opened a heated debate, first in France and then abroad. Edited by Stéphane Courtois, who also wrote the preface (instead of François Furet, who died a few months before its publication), this work attempts to provide an accurate account of the human cost of communism in view of the documentary evidence available today. The estimate is around 100 million dead — four times the body-count of Nazism. These figures are not really a revelation. From Boris Souvarine to Robert Conquest and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, many authors have dealt with matters such as the Gulag; the famines deliberately provoked by the Kremlin (which in 1921-22 and 1932-33 killed in the Ukraine five and six million people respectively); the forced deportations, between 1930 and 1953, of seven million people within the Soviet Union (kulaks, Volga Germans, Chechens, Tatars and others from Caucasus); the millions killed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, etc. By comparison, the *Black Book's* figures are rather conservative.¹

The intense interest in the *Black Book* is due to the fact that it is based on accurate documentation from the Moscow archives, now open to researchers. This is why the figures have not been questioned. Based on this documentation, some reviewers conclude that “the balance sheet of communism constitutes the worst case of political carnage in history,”² or “the greatest, the bloodiest criminal system in history.”³ Thus, the debate has not been about the facts themselves, but their interpretation. According to Courtois, communist regimes everywhere have “raised mass criminality to the level of a veritable system of government.” From this, one can infer communism did not contradict its principles when it killed people, but followed them — in other words, that communism was not just

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1. While Stéphane Courtois estimates at 20 million the number of victims in the USSR alone, Rudolf Rummel came up with a figure of 62 million. Jacques Rossi, *Le Manuel du Goulag* (Paris: Cherche-Midi, 1997) talks about 17 to 20 million prisoners in the Gulag between 1940 and 1950.

2. Martin Malia, “The Lesser Evil?” in *Times Literary Supplement* (March 27, 1998), p. 3.

3. Pierre Chaunu, “Les Jumeaux Malins du Deuxième Millénaire,” in *Commentaire* (Spring 1998), p. 219.

a system which committed crimes, but one whose very essence was criminal. As Tony Judt put it,⁴ today no one can dispute the criminal nature of communism. It should be added, that communism killed many more people than Nazism, it killed over a longer period of time than Nazism, and it began doing so before Nazism. “The methods used by Lenin and systematized by Stalin and those who emulated them,” writes Courtois, “are not only reminiscent of Nazi methods, but preceeded them.” This alone calls for “a comparative analysis concerning similarity between a regime which, since 1945, has been regarded as the most criminal of the century, and the communist system, which up to 1991 retained its international legitimacy, is still in power in some countries, and has supporters throughout the world.”

The debate concerns these two questions. The notion that communism can be regarded as inherently criminal and virtually exterminationist continues to generate intense opposition, but no less so than the notion of the comparability of communism and Nazism. Courtois has been attacked for even broaching these two subjects. The attacks have been so violent that some authors have not hesitated to speak of the *Black Book* as an “intellectual deception” and “propaganda” (Gilles Perrault), a “mess” (Jean-Marie Colombani), “a gift to the National Front at the time of the Papon trial” (Lilly Marcou), “the gruesome accounting of wholesalers” (Daniel Bensaid), “an ideological tract” (Jean-Jacques Marie), “a fraud” (Maurice Nadeau), “the denial of history” (Alain Blum) and even “negationism” (Adam Rayski). Revealing in this regard is that Courtois has been reproached for having written that: “the death by starvation of an Ukrainian kulak child as a result of the deliberate famine orchestrated by the Stalinist regime rates the same as the death by starvation of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto during the famine brought about by the Nazi regime.” What is scandalous, however, is not this sentence, but the fact that it was even questioned. Philippe Petit went as far as to write that “all deaths do not have the same value.”⁵ Unfortunately, he did not provide any criteria to distinguish between victims of the first rank and those of the second. The fact that today it is still unclear whether a crime is a crime or whether all the victims have the same value says much about the spirit of the times.

Communists have always rejected indignantly the very idea of comparing communism and Nazism. This is not surprising: the comparison would have been rejected with the same indignation by the Nazis. Yet, the comparison has been made many times over the years by authors such as Waldemar Gurian, Elie Halévy, George Orwell, Victor Serge, André Gide, Simone Weil, Marcel Mauss, and Bernard Shaw. Those who had the sad privilege of being imprisoned both in the Soviet and in the Nazi camps had the opportunity to compare them con-

4. In *International Herald Tribune* (December 23, 1997).

5. In *Marianne* (November 10, 1997).

cretely. One of these was Margarete Buber-Neumann. Part of a group of German communists who had fallen in disfavor with Stalin, she was imprisoned in the Karaganda camp in Siberia in 1937, then handed over by the Soviet secret police (then called NKVD) to the Gestapo at the time of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. Set free from the Ravensbruck camp in 1945, she had this to say: "I do not think a difference of degree ever existed or exists today in favor of the Soviet camps." Her voice was immediately suppressed.

The same comparison was the basis of Hannah Arendt's famous study of totalitarianism. Allan Bullock wrote parallel biographies of Stalin and Hitler. More recently, Furet, who has long wondered about the real reasons for the refusal to compare the two systems, has written: "This prohibition, internalized by the disconsolate as an almost religious truth, prevents thinking of communism in terms of its deepest reality — that it is totalitarian."⁶ Nazism and communism have been described by Pierre Chaunu as "heterozygous twins."⁷ In a speech at the annual meeting of the French Institute, Alain Besançon, characterized these systems as "equally criminal."⁸ The comparison between communism and Nazism is in fact not only legitimate, but indispensable because, without it, these two phenomena become unintelligible. The only way to understand them — and to understand the history of the first part of this century — is to "take them together" (Furet), to study them "in their own time" (Ernst Nolte), i.e., in their common historical context.

One of the reasons for this is what Nolte has called a "causal nexus" between communism and Nazism. In some respects, Nazism appears as a *symmetrical* reaction to communism. In 1922, at the time of the march on Rome, Mussolini sought to confront the "red threat." The following year, at the time of the march to the Feldherrnhalle, Nazism was born in the wake of the Bavarian Commune and the Spartacist insurrections. Given the weakness and ineptness of parliamentary regimes, the "national" revolutionary *coup d'état* seemed to be a logical answer to the Bolshevik *coup d'état*, and, at the same time, introduced into civil life some of methods learned in the trenches. Thus, Nazism could be defined as an anti-communist movement that borrowed from its adversary its forms and methods — beginning with terror itself. This thesis, originally put forth in 1942 by Sigmund Neumann,⁹ has been systematized by Nolte in his "historical and genetic" interpretation of the totalitarian phenomenon. It calls for an analysis of the common origins and interdependence between the two systems. Of course, pushed too far, it can lead to neglecting the ideological roots of both, which predate the Great

6. Letter to Jean Daniel, in *Commentaire* (Spring 1998), p. 246. Cf. also François Furet, "Nazisme et communisme: la comparaison interdite," in *L'Histoire* (March 1995), pp. 18-20.

7. *Op. cit.*

8. Now in *Commentaire* (Winter 1997-98), p.790. Some passages had already been published in *Le Monde* (October 22, 1997), p. 17.

9. *Permanent Revolution. Totalitarianism in the Age of International Civil War* (London, 1942).

War (1914-18). Yet, there is no doubt that it contains at least an element of truth. To put it another way, one can wonder whether Nazism would have been the same if there had been no Soviet communism. The answer is probably: no.

Another reason that justifies the comparison is the overlapping of their histories. Just as the Soviet system had mobilized under the banner of “anti-fascism,” so the Nazi system mobilized under the banner of “anti-communism.” The latter saw liberal democracies as weak and vulnerable to the threat of communism, while simultaneously the former denounced them as susceptible to “fascism.” Being anti-Nazi, communism tried to demonstrate that all rational anti-fascism led to communism. Being anti-communist, Nazism sought to instrumentalize anti-communism in a similar way — by reference to a common enemy. This tactic was not inconsequential. As George Orwell pointed out in the 1930s, many people became Nazis out of fear of communism, while many became communists in order to fight Nazism. Fear of communism led many to support Hitler in his “Crusade against Bolshevism.” Fear of Nazism led many to see the Soviet Union as humanity’s last hope.

To compare regimes is not to assimilate them: comparable regimes are not necessarily the same. To compare means to consider two distinct individual phenomena within the same category. It is neither to trivialize nor to relativize. The victims of communism do not cancel out the victims of Nazism any more than the victims of Nazism cancel out the victims of communism. Thus, the crimes of one regime cannot be used to justify or diminish the importance of the crimes perpetrated by the other: deaths do not cancel out: they add up. The fact that communism destroyed even more people than Nazism does not mean that the latter is “preferable” to the former, because it was never a matter of choosing between the two.

Communism destroyed more people than Nazism. Yet, the prevailing opinion is still that Nazism was worse than communism. How is this possible? Confronted with equally destructive systems, how can the more destructive one be the less horrible? How can one continue to reject the idea that they can be compared? The only way to do so is to refrain from drawing any balance sheet of the two systems to avoid confronting the results of the comparison. The argument most often advanced for this has to do with the difference between the initial inspirations of the two systems: Nazism was a doctrine of hate; communism, a doctrine of liberation. Communism was fostered by love of humanity, which Robert Hue calls “communion”; Nazism, by the rejection of the idea of humanity. Jean-Jacques Becker claims that “humanism is at the root of communism, while the opposite is the case with Nazism.”¹⁰ Roger Martelli

10. “Les Fièvres Anticommunistes,” in *L’Histoire* (November, 1997), p. 22.

adds: “Communism represents an idea of humanity based on reason and human equality.”¹¹ Roland Leroy writes: “At the roots of Nazism there is hatred of mankind. At the roots of communism, there is love of mankind.” According to Guy Konopnicki: “People became Nazi because of hatred of humanity. People became communist strictly for the opposite reason.”¹²

The conclusion is that Nazi crimes were foreseeable; communist crimes were not. Stalin’s crimes were the result of a perversion of communism, which was “an ideal of human liberation,”¹³ while Hitler’s crimes followed directly from his ideology. Nazism could be compared to a serial killer, while communism to the unfortunate good Samaritan who kills those he wants to save. Criminal by vocation, by exterminating people Nazism kept its promises and carried out its program. Criminal by mistake, communism betrayed its promises. Nazi practices followed directly from its doctrine, while the practices of Soviet communism “constituted, so to say, a misguided application of a sound ideology.”¹⁴ Communism was destructive only by accident, inadvertence, or awkwardness. Its crimes resulted from a faulty interpretation or from misdirection. Communist terror might be compared to an unlucky avatar, to “a kind of meteorological accident” (Besançon). In short, despite 100 million dead, communism could be defined as an idea of brotherly love that fell into hate unwillingly — a respectable project gone bad.

Thus, the human cost of communism should be regarded as the result of a “deviation.” Soviet terror, Jean-Jacques Becker explains, resulted above all from “the inability of its leaders to achieve by other means” an ideal “based on social justice and love of life.”¹⁵ Communist militants, Gilles Perrault adds, “joined a project that sought to be universal and emancipatory. The fact that this ideal was corrupted does not detract from their motivations.” According to Madeleine Rebérioux, honorary president of the League of Human Rights: “To say that communism is equivalent to Nazism is to forget . . . that the USSR never organized the exclusion of any human group from the common law”!¹⁶ In short: communist crimes were progressive. This argument calls for closer scrutiny.

11. “Une Différence de Nature,” in *Avant-garde* (December 1997), p. 28.

12. “Un Naufrage dans l’Archipel du Goulag,” in *L’Événement du Jeudi* (November 6, 1997), p. 22.

13. Robert Hue, “Nazisme, Communisme: La Comparaison est Odieuse et Inacceptable,” in *L’Événement du Jeudi* (November 13, 1997), p. 59. Simone Korff Sausse has rightly remarked that Robert Hue denounces the Gulag as a “monstrosity” in order to present Stalinism as a pathological excrescence without any relation with “real” communism. The “monster” (the Gulag) is what differs in nature from normality (communism). “Here is a good example,” she writes, “of a stalinist maneuver pretending to be a critique of Stalinism. The notion of the monster seeks to rule out debate.” See “Monstruosité et Manoeuvre Stalinienne,” in *Libération* (December 9, 1997), p. 5.

14. In *L’Histoire* (January 1998), p. 3.

15. Interview in *La Vie* (November 27, 1997), p. 11.

16. In *Le Journal du Dimanche* (November 2, 1997).

“One has the right to wonder,” writes Courtois, “why killing in the hope of ‘a better life thereafter’ is more excusable than slaughter linked to a racist doctrine, and why does the illusion (or the hypocrisy) constitute attenuating circumstances to mass murder.”¹⁷ It is unclear why it is less important or less condemnable to kill those who have been promised happiness instead of killing those who have been promised nothing. To commit evil in the name of good is no better than to commit evil in the name of evil. To destroy freedom in the name of freedom is no better than to destroy it in the name of the need to suppress it. The first may be even worse. A vice is less excusable when practiced by those who profess virtue, because they are supposed to abide by their principles. Thus, there is a kind of logic in judging more severely a system with good intentions, but which, “in reality, has been imposed everywhere with violence and has destroyed a huge number of victims, than one where the perpetrators’ intentions were bad from the very beginning.”¹⁸ In other words, mitigating circumstances are not on the side one may expect at first sight.

Here the question arises whether one should judge political regimes on the basis of their intentions or their actions. Marx, it should be recalled, was the first to challenge the morality of intentions: according to him, history comes first of all with *praxis*. As Chantal Delsol put it: “When an idealist has committed crimes for 80 years and refuses to be called a criminal, because of his original intention, one can only conclude that intention is to blame.”¹⁹ “To see the last Marxists in this country take refuge in a morality of intentions,” writes Jacques Julliard, “will remain, for those who like to laugh, one of the century’s best jokes.”²⁰

To claim that an ideal stands or falls with its intentions is to confuse truth with sincerity.²¹ Today, this is not unusual. It goes along with an approach to the history of ideas that is at once subjective and moral. Instead of distinguishing right from wrong ideas, one prefers to distinguish between “good” and “bad” ideas, without specifying how to determine which is which. (This is one of the reasons why it is not worth the effort to refute wrong ideas). In reality, however, to qualify the communist ideal as “generous,” means nothing. Two questions arise immediately. The first: “generous” according to which criteria? The second: is a “generous” idea necessarily right? Communism and Nazism are two political systems based on false ideas. In this respect, their real or supposed “generosity” is unimportant. If one can massacre four times more people in the

17. In *Le Monde* (December 20, 1997).

18. Ernst Nolte, correspondence with François Furet, in *Commentaire* (Winter 1997-98), p. 806.

19. “Criminels par Erreur,” in *Valeurs Actuelles* (November 22, 1997), p. 31,

20. “Ne Dites pas ‘Jamais’,” in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (November 20, 1997), p. 49.

21. “What is important is not whether my accounts are true, but whether they are sincere,” writes Albert Jacquard in his *Petite Philosophie à l’Usage des Non-philosophes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997), p. 205.

name of a “generous” idea than in the name of a doctrine of hate, then it may be time to mistrust generosity. Finally, the sophistry of human unhappiness is on the side of the hangman, not of the victims. To be the victim of a beautiful idea, even if corrupted, does not make one less of a victim: for the one being hung, what is the difference? When the Inquisition burned people for their own good, they were not thereby consoled. When the means are the same, the ends are blurred.

It is not enough to say that communism is a wonderful idea gone bad. It must be explained how it could go bad, i.e., how a wonderful idea, far from protecting against horror, did not prevent it any more than a bad idea. How was it possible to persecute people in the name of the good, to create camps to free people, and to establish terror in the name of progress? How could hope become a nightmare? This is the real philosophical question. Unfortunately, there is nothing philosophical about the proposed answer. It is limited to circumstances. Allegedly, Leninist violence would then be the heir of Tsarist violence. It would have been fed by the violence of the 1914-18 war, and indeed by the capitalists’ reaction, then in full swing in Russia. It could have resulted from the Bolsheviks having to fight the white army during the civil war. Since they came to power in a country lacking any democratic traditions, the Bolsheviks might have been “carried away reluctantly in a cycle of violence they could not stop” (Michel Dreyfus). In that case, however, this violence would have been contained. On the contrary, Stalinist terror was a deviation or a corruption of Russian communism: the violence would have changed in nature, not only in degree.

But it is precisely this explanation that the publication of the *Black Book* rules out. Rejecting the fable of the “good Lenin” and the “bad Stalin,” it shows that the system of terror was established as soon as Lenin took power. Since 1914, he had said: “the essence of our work . . . is to transform the war into a civil war,” which is only “the natural continuation, the development and the intensification of the class struggle.” The Cheka was established on December 1917. At that time, Trotsky stated: “In less than a month, terror will take some very violent forms, like what happened during the French Revolution.” While, between 1825 and 1917, the Tsarist regime sentenced 6,321 to death, most convictions being commuted to hard labor, by March 1918, the Leninist regime, in power for only five months, had already killed 18,000 people. On August 31, 1918, the head of the Cheka ordered “every person who dared to publish the slightest propaganda against the Soviet regime” sent to concentration camps. More precisely, Trotsky pointed out that: “the question of knowing to whom power belongs . . . would be resolved not by references to constitutional articles but, rather, by recourse to every kind of violence.” In 1921, there were already seven concentration camps, filled mostly with women and old people. Thus, communist terror cannot be interpreted as simply a continuation of the pre-revolutionary political culture; and even less as a

reflection of “violence coming from the people” or of a “Russian servile tradition.” Finally, it cannot be explained as a simple response to “white terror.” On the contrary, repression developed full blast only after the civil war ended.

The argument concerning mitigating “circumstances” calls for a contextualization of communist crimes, and for taking into account the historical series of causes and effects, e.g., the need to defend against the enemy. This procedure is rarely adopted *vis-à-vis* Nazi crimes. But if there is nothing specifically communist about communist terror, then there is nothing specifically Nazi about Nazi terror. Presumably, despite its pretensions to universality, communism somehow can be explained geographically. But the fact that it has been destructive everywhere it came to power makes one skeptical about the decisive influence of the context. If it was a matter of circumstances, why were these circumstances reproduced everywhere? Moreover, it is difficult to see terror as the result of a “deviation,” since it was there from the very beginning. If Stalin only systematized the system of terror founded by Lenin, it is then equally difficult to contrapose the communist ideal to its concrete applications. Of course, one can argue that the Soviet system has never had anything to do with communism. But if Lenin was not a communist, who was ever one?

Julliard wonders: “In what sense are criminals appealing to ‘good’ less condemnable than criminals appealing to ‘evil’?”²² The question is pertinent, but poorly formulated. Nazism never “appealed to evil” any more than communism did. It made use of ideas that one can deservedly find false, and therefore evil, which is completely different. But it is not as if the evaluation one has of oneself corresponded to that of other. Otherwise, one could claim that communism also appealed not to the good, but to evil, in proportion to the horror these ideas can suggest. The rationale of opposing the Nazi “doctrine of hate” to the communist “ideal of human emancipation” is thus debatable. It would amount to contraposing a definition of communism by its supporters to a definition of Nazism by its opponents. Under these conditions, it is not difficult to make the first appear as good as the latter evil. From an artificial asymmetry, one draws a conclusion no less artificial. This is a *non sequitur*.

Nazism did not pretend to promise people any less “happiness” than communism. It did not promise any less a “radiant” outlook to its supporters. To say the opposite, as David Lindenberg does, when he writes that the Nazis “gained many supporters because of its penchant for murder,”²³ makes its appeal to the masses inexplicable. To say that a political system could generate enthusiasm by presenting itself openly as advocating a “doctrine of hate” is tantamount to saying that its supporters were sick, mad, criminals, or perverts. Then one would have to explain

22. In *L'Année des Fantômes* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), p. 342.

23. “Remous autour du *Livre Noir du Communisme*,” in *Esprit* (January 1998), p. 192.

how an entire population could go crazy. If it is by nature, what does this say about human nature? If it is by accident, how does it come about — and how can it end?

Nazism and communism seduced the masses with different ideals, both of which can appear equally attractive. The whole problem comes from what the realization of these ideals implied in both cases: the eradication of part of humanity. From this viewpoint, the distinction between extermination as a means to realize a political objective and extermination as an end in itself is doubtful: no regime has ever seen the massacres it engaged in as an “end in itself.” Courtois characterizes “racial genocide” and “class genocide” as two sub-categories of “crimes against humanity.” In both cases, the end is the same. Both the utopia of a classless society and of a pure race required the elimination of those presumed to be obstacles to the realization of a “grandiose” project, impediments to the realization of a radically better society. In both cases, the ideology (racial or class struggle) led to a bad principle: the exclusion of whole categories (“inferior” races or “harmful” classes) composed of people whose only crime was to belong to one of these categories, i.e., to exist. Both systems designated an absolute enemy with whom it was impossible to compromise. In both cases, the result was planned terror. Class or racial hatred, social or racial prophylaxis, it is all the same.

Here “class” is not a more flexible or less indelible category than “race.” Both were equally essentialized. On November 1, 1918, one of the first leaders of the Cheka, Martyn Latsis, declared: “We do not make war against people in particular. We exterminate the ‘bourgeoisie’ as a class.” On January 24, 1919, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ordered that cosacks had to be “exterminated and physically liquidated to the last one.” Later, Stalin would say that the “Kulaks are not human being.” In 1932, Maxime Gorki added: “Class hatred must be cultivated by organic repulsion of the enemy as an inferior being: a physical but also a moral degenerate.” From the viewpoint of a Lysenko, maintaining the inheritance of acquired characteristics, social defects could well be considered genetically transmissible.

Furet wrote that Nazism and communism are as “opposed as the particular to the universal.” Others gave communism credit, because at least it had been moved by universalist considerations. This reasoning is also biased. The fact that Nazism pretended to make happy only part of humanity — the German people — while communism pretended to extend this happiness to all of humanity does not tip the balance in favor of the second. When one fights in the name of a nation, one can exclude from this nation. “To purify the race” at least limits havoc to the race. But to purify humanity? On the basis of its presuppositions, Nazism described some of its adversaries as “sub-humans.” On the same basis, communism could only exclude from humanity. Efforts to regenerate all of humanity inevitably lead to excluding from humanity those who supposedly prevent this

regeneration. Precisely because, from the very beginning, communism wanted to fight in the name of all of humanity, its destructive character spread to all of humanity. Far from providing attenuating circumstances, its universalist pretenses explain its universally murderous character.

Thus, efforts to emancipate the whole earth do not prevent terror but, on the contrary, confer to these efforts a higher legitimation. To defend an absolute ideal justifies recourse to absolute means. On August 1919, one could read the following in *Krasnii Metch* (*The Red Sword* — an organ of the Cheka of Kiev): “Our morality is unprecedented, our humanity is absolute, because it is based on a new ideal: to destroy all forms of oppression and violence. For us, everything is allowed, because we are the first in the world to raise the sword, not to oppress, or to drive into slavery, but to free humanity from its chains. . . . Blood? Let it flow!”

Hostile to any comparison between Nazism and communism, some authors have sought to find differences in motivation or behavior, beyond the supposed differences in inspiration. “A young man moving in the direction of communism,” writes Jean Daniel, “is at least living with a desire for communion. A young fascist is only fascinated by domination. That is the essential difference.”²⁴ As Jean-Marie Colombani put it: “There will always be a difference between those who devote themselves to ideals linked to democratic [*sic*] hope, and those attracted by a system based on exclusion, triggering the individuals’ most dangerous instincts.”²⁵ These are completely subjective evaluations. As Besançon has noted, in reality both Nazism and communism proposed some “higher ideal” able to “generate enthusiastic devotion and heroic acts.” Both seduced famous individuals and leading intellectuals. Both inspired rare self-sacrifices. The Germans supported their Führer to the end, despite destruction and death, while the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in its becoming discredited among the Soviet population. But communism also has provided immense hope for millions of people. It inspired struggles that were often just and necessary. To claim, with Jean-Jacques Becker, that “Nazism or fascism never inspired the same fervor”²⁶ as communism, is to forget that 360,000 Waffen SS were foreign volunteers, while only 35,000 foreigners volunteered for the International Brigades.

If it is true that totalitarian systems organized their own mass mobilizations, it is no less true that totalitarianism also benefited, at least for a time, from a mass following and that often this support has translated into behavior worthy of admiration. Instead of denying or ignoring this, it would be better to ask, how were political systems which have turned out to be the most destructive in history able simultaneously to inspire so much devotion, heroism, sacrifice and selflessness.

24. In *Le Nouvel Observateur* (October 30, 1997), p. 51.

25. “Le Communisme et Nous,” in *Le Monde* (December 5, 1997).

26. “Les Fièvres Anticomunistes,” in *L’Histoire* (November 1997), p. 6.

A first approximation at an answer might be that, to the extent that one sees the absolute in these systems, they lead to absolute behaviors, in good as well as bad. That the same system can be simultaneously criminal and able to inspire admirable behaviors, will inevitably offend naive individuals or committed partisans, resulting (wrongly) in their conclusions that the system is not criminal or (equally wrong) that these behaviors are not worthy of admiration. That supporters of totalitarian regimes may behave heroically does not make the cause they defend any better and, conversely, the nature of this cause does not detract from individual heroism. The fact that individuals are virtuous does not automatically make the doctrines they espouse virtuous. Pascal is wrong in claiming that one can take seriously only those who are willing to die for their beliefs: the fact that they are willing to risk being killed testifies only to the strength of their convictions, not to their truth.

In a bizarre way, Martelli relies on the fact that Stalin unleashed many purges within his own Party, when he writes: "There were some communists who were anti-Stalinists, but there were no anti-Hitler Nazi."²⁷ The argument is taken from Nicholas Werth, who claims that there have never been any Nazis critical of Hitlerism, or who "sought to reform the system from within." The existence of communists, who became victims under Stalin, or revolted against the "disfiguration" of their ideas by the Soviet regime, is supposed to testify to the betrayal of communist ideals by "official" communism. This is a weak argument. Robespierre was a victim of the Terror, but that does not exonerate him of his responsibilities within the establishment of this terror. It is typical of all political systems to breed dissidents of every kind. It does not follow that these dissidents are automatically right in their opposition to their former comrades. As for the idea that there were no anti-Hitler Nazis, it is simply false. Besides those who, in 1933 aspired to a "national revolution" in Germany and were not only disappointed, but frequently persecuted by the Third Reich (such as the brothers Otto and Gregor Strasser, as well as victims of the January 1934 purge), here one could cite Hermann Rauschning's *Revolution of Nihilism*, published on the eve of the war, which is comparable to Boris Souvarine's *Stalin*. Finally, there are well-known opposition groups, which developed during the war within the SS and the SD. If the Third Reich had lasted longer than a dozen years, the number of dissidents is likely to have grown.

On the other hand, one can say that Nazism killed less Nazis than communism killed communists. Is this to the communists credit? One of the particularities of the Soviet, as opposed to the Nazi system, is that the regime's supporters were viewed with equal suspicion as those who remained its adversaries. In the

27. *Op. cit.*, p. 28

Soviet system, the imaginary of the conspiracy was internalized to the point where supporters were seen as so many traitors in power. That is why surveillance of the population was so intense and incentives to inform even more systematic: in 1939, the Gestapo employed 6,900 people; the NKVD, 350,000. Another characteristic typical of communist terror, exposed at the Moscow trials, was the insistence to make dissidents “confess” to crimes they had not committed; in other words, they were forced to negate their own existence. Classical tyrannies limited themselves merely to silencing the opposition. In addition, totalitarian regimes wanted to maintain loyalty and control not only of actions but also thoughts. Soviet communism wanted to control its population’s mental reservations. Lenin and Stalin ordered the slaughter of many of their comrades (with the exception of the January 1934 purge, Hitler did not follow suit). Understandably, this shocked survivors. But it is bizarre to use these excesses of inhumanity to conclude that communism was more humane. Of course, Nazism generally treated Germans very differently than the population of other occupied countries, while Stalin did not discriminate. Only a small minority of the people in Nazi concentration camps were German, while 15 million Russians were sent to the Gulag between 1934 and 1947. Once again, the fact that Nazis attacked primarily foreign populations, while communist regimes massacred mostly their own people, is not an argument in favor of the communists. In penal law, to kill a member of one’s own family is considered an especially serious crime.

In claiming, in an editorial deemed important enough to appear in an anthology under the heading of “influential literature,” that the *Black Book* risks “playing into the hands of the extreme Right,” Jean-Marie Colombani deploys a strategic argument. Speaking of “ideological one-sidedness,” “simplification,” and “amalgam,” he writes that the real danger is that it “serves as an alibi for those who wish to prove that one crime is worth another, thereby breaking down the last remaining barriers preventing the legitimation of the extreme Right.”²⁸ Presumably, the only means to “delegitimize” the extreme Right is to maintain that all crimes are not equal, or, in other words, that some are less serious than others. But according to what criteria?

The argument that denouncing the crimes of communism plays into the hands of the extreme Right recycles Stalinist rhetoric used to mobilize against a third party, a common enemy. This rhetoric is based on a simple syllogism: since some “bad” anti-communists may make use of this kind of arguments, one should not give them any ammunition by criticizing communism. This is teleological utilitarianism: there are some undesirable truths, which are unprofitable, and necessary lies. The question here concerns the nature of truth: is truth what manifests itself

28. *Op. cit.*

as true or what, under certain circumstances, can be anticipated to be profitable? If truth does not have intrinsic worth, but is only good to the extent that one can use it in the service of a cause or a determined belief, then there is no truth at all. Furthermore, if truth depends on the use one can make of it, then it is no longer possible to claim that one doctrine is more true than another. One can no longer make any claims about the true and the false, but only about “good” and “bad,” with “good” being purely instrumental, without any relation to the true.

If one follows Jean-Marie Colombani’s logic, all historical research that risks nourishing bad thoughts should be forbidden. Thus, one must follow the footsteps of Jean-Paul Sartre, who pretended that silence regarding the Soviet camps was necessary “not to lead Billancourt to despair.” “Those people,” Courtois observes, “have never broken with the culture of the political commissar, which poisons the publishing environment.”²⁹

From the very beginning, the idea of any comparison between the communist and Nazi regimes was also questioned, because of the horrible organized persecution of Jews during the Third Reich. Deemed “unique,” this persecution is by nature incommensurable and even “indescribable.” It allegedly constitutes an unparalleled event — in the past, in the present and even in the future. The word “genocide” does not have a plural, and Nazism is the black star whose dismal light pales all others. Challenging this “uniqueness” (*Einzigartigkeit*) would lead to the trivialization of Nazism. Recognition of this “uniqueness” compels one to see it as an absolute evil, i.e., an evil incomparable to any other. However, from a historian’s standpoint, it is clear that to regard the phenomenon of Nazism as “unique” does not permit its understanding, hinders any analysis, which is automatically seen as a “trivialization.” An event unrelated to any other becomes incomprehensible. It ceases to be a necessarily contextualized historical event, in order to become a pure idea. Moreover, to declare it “unique” is to take a contradictory path, because to refuse to admit that there is anything comparable about the two systems and to posit their differences as “absolute” leaves one unable to find precisely what makes them unique. Tzvetan Todorov justifiably asks: “How does one decide that something is different from everything else, if one has never compared them?”³⁰

The idea that one “trivializes” Nazi crimes by refusing to admit their “uniqueness” is equally untenable. It presupposes that crimes cancel each other out or that, contextualized, murders become less murderous. This idea conceals another, actually a perverse one, which paves the way for its own reversal: to

29. “Le Communisme Réel a Produit un Cauchemar,” in *La Une* (January 1998), p. 18.

30. “Je conspire, Hannah Arendt conspirait, Raymond Aron aussi . . .” in *Le Monde* (January 31, 1998).

make a system and it alone “absolute evil” relativizes the deeds of all others. If to recall communist crimes amounts to trivializing those of Nazism, then to recall Nazi crimes necessarily trivializes all other crimes. In order not to trivialize a single case, one ends up with a general trivialization. Here one can ask whether “to trivialize” is the right word. There is certainly a “banality of evil” (Hannah Arendt), because evil, along with the good, is part of human nature.

To dogmatically claim absolute particularity for any phenomenon amounts to removing its potential exemplary character. To draw the lesson from the past implies, by definition, that this past is at least partly reproducible, or it would be useless to pretend to draw any lessons from it. Once again, as Todorov writes: “what is particular cannot teach us anything at all for the future.”³¹ The same people who become indignant about comparing communism to Nazism, at the same time attribute to Nazism all sorts of ideas they dislike. This is inconsistent. The same people who insist that Nazism is a “unique” phenomenon also claim that they see it being reborn every day. One cannot have it both ways. Nazism cannot be “unique” and at the same time potentially present everywhere. By definition, a “unique” event cannot be repeated. If it can be repeated, then it is not “unique.”

The thesis concerning “uniqueness” is actually a metaphysical argument. When the executioners cannot be compared to any other, the same goes for the victims. The absolute particularity of the one implies the absolute particularity of the other — absolute evil implies absolute good. Then, persecution is explained by the election. Thus, Jewish suffering is part “not of history, but, on the contrary, of a grace whereby the Jews would be the Christ-people.”³² Jean Daniel, Edgar Morin and Henry Rousso talk about “Judeo-centrism” to characterize this view.³³ But it does not make any more sense to present an executioner as representing absolute evil than it does to present a victim as representing absolute good. This would mean that there are some lives more unpardonable to suppress than others. This idea is precisely the one held by the Nazis, when they talked about “lives without the value of life.” It is unacceptable. No people or human category has by nature a superior existential or moral status. None can infer from their beliefs, their origin, their collective contribution of their history, the pretense to claim themselves ontologically superior or more irreplaceable than another.

The comprehension of the past cannot be superimposed on moral judgments. To defer to history, morality becomes condemned to powerlessness, because it bases itself on indignation — defined by Aristotle as a non-vicious form of jealousy — and that by proceeding by discrediting, indignation prevents the analysis

31. *Les Abus de la Mémoire* (Paris: Arlea, 1995).

32. Bernard-Henri Lévy in *Le Point* (December 13, 1997), p. 146.

33. “As for myself, I do not feel any embarrassment,” writes Jean Daniel, “to claim that this quasi-mystical conception presents all the dangers of a Judeo-centric vision.” See his “Sur un texte d’Alain Besançon” in *Commentaire* (Spring 1998), p. 228.

of what it discredits. As Clément Rosset writes: “Moral disqualification allows one to avoid all intelligent efforts to grasp the disqualified object, in the sense that a moral judgment always translates into a refusal to analyze and at the same time a refusal to think.”³⁴ In addition, the moral denunciation of communism or of Nazism overlooks the fact that these systems themselves boast they are eminently moral. They do not pretend to abolish morality, but to invent another one — or to oppose theirs to that of others.³⁵

Alain Badiou points out that: “Supporters of the ethical ideology are so intent in locating the particularity of the extermination directly in evil, that very often they categorically deny that Nazism was political at all. But this is a position at the same time weak and lacking courage . . . The supporters of ‘democracy and human rights’ are fond of defining politics, with Hannah Arendt, as the domain of “being together” . . . [But] Hitler himself wanted nothing more for the Germans than ‘being together’.”³⁶ Totalitarian systems are political systems. It is sufficient to condemn them by recognizing that they are politically bad: their poor political quality alone renders them unacceptable.

The idea of absolute evil applied to human affairs is senseless, because the absolute is not of this world. In the order of positive knowledge, not only are there no “incommensurable” sufferings, but there are also no crimes that cannot be compared to anything else. From the fact that the means employed to commit them are unprecedented, it does not follow that the crime is “unique.” The criminal character of an act is the result of its criminal nature, not of the means employed to commit it. All events obtain within a context, and from this follows that they can be compared to others. All events are simultaneously unique and universal, eminently particular and eminently comparable. In the end, to isolate a totalitarian system in order to turn it into an absolute evil leads to forgetting that totalitarian systems themselves designate their adversaries as absolute evil. To see in them absolute evil is to mirror them. Banishing them from humanity is to become followers of their school.

Alain de Benoist

34. *Le Démon de la Tautologie. Suivi de Cinq Petites Pièces Morales* (Paris: Minuit: 1997), p. 68.

35. Once again, as Clément Rosset writes: “To denounce the moral order imposed by the German National Socialists during their painful reign is not and has not been a healthy reaction, unless, and only unless, this denunciation itself does not take the form of a moral denunciation seeking to annul the first.” *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

36. *L’Ethique. Essai sur la Conscience du Mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), p. 58.