

## **Was the Reign of Terror Totalitarian? A Study of Hannah Arendt and J.L. Talmon**

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### **Abstract**

The French Revolution of 1789 abolished the monarchy and transformed France into a republic which claimed to rule by the general will. Based on the Enlightenment concepts of natural rights and legal egalitarianism, the French Revolution can be seen in part as an ambitious attempt to not only create a new government but also an ideal republican society. However, it resulted in the reign of Terror, during which the revolutionary government disregarded its earlier promise of liberty and instead systematically eliminated its opponents, arguing that this was a necessary step before France could arrive at the perfect society. In order to understand the recent communist revolutions and the totalitarian regime of Stalin, twentieth-century scholars turned to the French Revolution and analyzed the phenomenon of the Terror. By comparing the analyses of the French Revolution by two political philosophers, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and J.L. Talmon (1916-1980), this paper will seek to determine whether or not the reign of Terror satisfies the requirements of totalitarianism. Arendt and Talmon both argued that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought, particularly his conception of the general will, was a negative influence on the French revolutionaries and a leading cause of the Terror. Although Arendt and Talmon viewed Rousseau's influence in similar lights, they came to different conclusions about whether or not the Terror was totalitarian. Talmon studied how Rousseau's influence on the French revolutionaries led them to conceive of democracy in a totalitarian way; since the general will, which is allegedly infallible, would be governing France, there could be no legitimate reason to disagree with or oppose the revolutionary government. Arendt pointed out that in Rousseau's philosophy, members of society must subjugate their own individual wills to the general will. The French revolutionaries adapted this to mean that anyone who disagreed with them was not subjugating their will to the general will and thus was an enemy of the state. However, since most modern social revolutions have had reigns of Terror, Rousseau's philosophy, though proto-communist, cannot be entirely to blame. Acknowledging this, Arendt posited that the reign of Terror occurred because the French revolutionaries addressed social problems instead of focusing solely on political changes; this view of the Terror could account for the similar reigns of Terror in other social revolutions. Thus, while Arendt acknowledged that the Terror bore some similarities to totalitarian governments, she insisted that it was not totalitarian because it lacked some essential characteristics that she had outlined in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, most notably the existence of concentration camps.

**Keywords:** French Revolution, Totalitarianism, Terror

### **1. Introduction**

The Terror was perhaps the most complex moment of the French Revolution, when revolutionary fervor was at its highest. During this brief episode, the revolutionary government, under the leadership of Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety, attempted to create an ideal society. Their attempts to recreate both man and society

influenced future revolutions and political movements. With the background of Stalin's regime in Russia and the Nazis in Germany, twentieth-century scholars sought to understand the phenomenon of totalitarianism that had shaped their time. Political theorists J.L. Talmon (1916-1980) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) both turned to the French Revolution and the Terror, hoping to better understand modern events by re-examining it and comparing it to totalitarian movements. Despite the superficial similarities of the Terror to totalitarian regimes, Arendt makes the case that the Terror, upon closer examination, lacks many of the defining characteristics of totalitarianism. She does not make this argument explicit, but it can be gleaned through a study of her many works. On the other hand, Talmon's argument is fully captured in his book *On the Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, in which he is confident that the Terror is totalitarian – or, at least, proto-totalitarian. Although the two disagree, both of their arguments are driven by personal needs to understand and deal with the real force of totalitarianism, which, in the form of German Nazis, had so deeply influenced their lives. Furthermore, the mere fact that they compared the Terror to more contemporary totalitarian regimes influenced other scholars, notably François Furet and George L Mosse, to view the Terror in that light. Furet's *Revolutionary France 1770-1870* (1992) shares a similar interpretation of the Terror and Rousseau's influence with Talmon, while Mosse's *The Fascist Revolution* (1999) devotes a chapter to explaining how the Terror held the origins of fascism. These scholars' attempts to compare the Terror to contemporary totalitarian regimes highlights the twentieth-century desire to make sense of its chaos by reaching into the past.

The biographies of the two main scholars analyzed in this essay, Hannah Arendt and J.L. Talmon, are rather similar. Both were Jews who had to flee mainland Europe because of the Nazis. Talmon was originally from Poland; he studied in Israel and France before immigrating to London, England, where he wrote *On the Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* in 1952. Arendt was German, and she first moved to France, where she ended up being put in an internment camp.<sup>1</sup> She then settled in New York, where she wrote her many works. This essay draws on the following four: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future* (1961), and *On Revolution* (1963). Both authors have been described as “Cold War liberals,” and both rejected Marxist thought. Undoubtedly, their experiences influenced their quest to understand totalitarianism.

## 2. J.L. Talmon

Talmon argued that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* held the origins of totalitarian democracy because of its concept of the general will and the idea that people can and ought to be ‘forced to be free’. Talmon devotes the third chapter of his book, *On the Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, to explaining how Rousseau's political philosophy is the beginning of totalitarian democracy. Enlightenment philosophers were obsessed with finding the perfect political systems, and they tended to favor democracy as the most legitimate form of government. At the same time, however, they had little positive experience of a government without a strong leader. Therefore, they wanted a government which would not have to suffer the strife of being torn apart by political parties. Rousseau's concept of the general will was appealing because it was infallible; it incorporated direct democracy without allowing for mob rule, and it was based on protecting the civil rights and liberties of its citizens. However, Rousseau's model does not allow for political dissent, and, because Rousseau refuses to equate the general will to the aggregation of individual wills,<sup>2</sup> Talmon argues that it allows for the citizens true wants and demands to be overlooked as the government only has to carry out the general will. However, while the concept of the general will allowed for Robespierre to seize power and bring about the Terror, it also politicized every aspect of citizens' lives, for they had to always be in accord with the general will. This, according to Talmon, is one of the main reasons that Rousseau's philosophy is proto-totalitarian.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his book, Talmon focused on the revolutionaries' use of the concept of the general will, arguing that one of the main revolutionaries' beliefs was that “Liberty is attained only when the general will can express itself as an entity, as the sole and undivided sovereign deliberating on the common good of the people as the whole”.<sup>4</sup> During the Terror, liberty was explicitly tied to obeying the general will, to being a virtuous citizen of the state. The revolutionaries originally justified the Terror by pointing to the war with Austria and the revolts in the Vendée; in such times, it was especially necessary to ensure obedience and loyalty to the new revolutionary government. Because of the state of affairs, “disagreement could not be considered by them [the Jacobins] as mere difference of opinion but appeared as crime and perversion”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the revolutionaries maintained that while “Resistance to oppression was a sacred right and duty in a tyrannical state”, the revolutionary government was not tyrannical because it carried out the general will and so “once the regime of liberty had been established, once the people had come into their own, the claim to resist ‘oppression’ by the new order was mockery or perversity, or sheer

selfishness”.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the revolutionary government justified executing ‘enemies of the state’ en masse during the Terror. Talmon saw similarities between these arguments and those of contemporary totalitarian regimes such as Stalin’s Russia. While totalitarian states often put their state enemies in camps instead of immediately executing them, Talmon believed that the reasoning behind labeling groups and individuals as enemies of the state remained the same.

The notion that citizens who were promised liberty were unable to criticize their government indicates a positive understanding of liberty – not positive in the sense of “good,” however. A positive notion of liberty, according to political philosopher Isaiah Berlin, is an understanding of liberty in which liberty is defined as the actions that one would take if one was completely rational, if one knew what was best for oneself. It argues that there is a set path that one must follow in order to have liberty. Talmon argues that this is what the revolutionaries meant when they used the word liberty. Governments who ascribe to a positive notion of liberty are “in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of the ‘real’ selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfillment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his ‘true’, albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self”.<sup>7</sup> The revolutionaries’ use of positive liberty is one of the main reasons that Talmon calls the Terror totalitarian. This concept is clearly in Rousseau’s social contract, with the famous passage of “forced to be free”,<sup>8</sup> where Rousseau claims that anyone who breaks the general will must be forced to obey it by the rest of society because following the general will is what leads to freedom, and in the Terror. The “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” states that the law is the expression of the general will. Since the general will, according to Rousseau, is infallible, this effectively means that the decisions of the revolutionary National Assembly were beyond criticism. To criticize the laws was to disagree with the general will and that was to place oneself outside of the nation and therefore outside of the protection of the state. Talmon felt that this made the Terror proto-totalitarian.

Another reason that Talmon believed that the Terror was totalitarian was the messianic nature of the Jacobins. The Jacobins, according to Talmon, not only wanted to create the perfect society, but they firmly believed that they had the means to do so. Because their ideal society was possible, they easily justified any costs of attaining it.

It is vital for the understanding of Jacobinism to remember all the time that the Jacobins sincerely and deeply believed that their terrorist dictatorship, even when maintained for no compelling reason of defense, was nothing but a prelude to a harmonious state of society, in which coercion would become unnecessary. The regime of force was merely a provisional phase, an inescapable evil, at a deeper level and within a broader context no dictatorship at all. Jacobinism was nurtured on a deep eighteenth-century faith in man, his essential goodness and perfectibility, and on the belief in continuous social progress, at the end of which there was some terminus of social integration and harmony.<sup>9</sup>

Talmon describes this as giving Jacobinism a religious quality because Jacobins had a religious belief that they could create the perfect society on earth. At the beginning of his book, he points out how this belief was a main focus in Enlightenment thought with the plethora of social contract theories and so, once again, to Rousseau. Rousseau believed that traditional society corrupted men, who were pure in the state of nature. Since it was impossible to go back to the state of nature, the social contract’s goal was to create a society in which men would be as pure as they once were in the state of nature. The revolutionaries believed that by creating the perfect society, they would be able to perfect men. Talmon reasoned that this belief in a ‘heaven on earth’ was similar to promises made by totalitarian states; he wrote that “Robespierre believed that the vision he was spinning was something attainable, real, and full of precise, compact meaning. ‘The passage from crime to virtue’ to be accomplished by the Revolution meant to Robespierre a real event a turning point, a new birth, a definite date, like the passage from a class society to a classless society was to mean to Communist Messianism”.<sup>10</sup> This firm belief in their ability to create a perfect society was a significant similarity between the Terror and totalitarianism. Between this and the positive notion of liberty, both found in Rousseau’s philosophy, Talmon found the Terror to be totalitarian.

### **3. Hannah Arendt**

Whereas Talmon makes his argument explicit in one book, Arendt’s stance on whether the Terror was totalitarian can only be surmised through an extensive study of her political philosophy. In her book, *On Revolution*, Arendt

contrasts the French Revolution to the American Revolution and attempts to explain what about the French Revolution led to the Terror, but she does not argue that its mistakes mean that it was totalitarian. Arendt identified some differences between the two revolutions. The French Revolution, she said, was “concerned with both liberation and freedom”<sup>11</sup>, not realizing that the two are inherently different, “that liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it”<sup>12</sup>. She then traces the two concepts through history, finding the origin of freedom in the Greeks who “held that no one can be free except among his peers”<sup>13</sup>, thus implying that freedom is necessarily linked to equality and also needs a public sphere, a political space in order for people to exercise their freedom. Liberation, on the other hand, is the mere desire “to be free from oppression”<sup>14</sup>. Revolutions can easily achieve liberation, but freedom is harder to establish.<sup>15</sup> The American Revolution also wished to establish freedom, which Arendt had made part of her criteria for being a revolution, but it did so in a different way and thus did not have a reign of Terror. What made the French Revolution different from the American Revolution is that when the French revolutionaries sought to liberate masses, they tried to destroy social and economic oppression as well as political oppression.<sup>16</sup> They believed that true freedom could only arise once all citizens were equal socially, economically, and politically; the American Revolution, on the other hand, only focused on political equality and liberation. Furthermore, the French revolutionaries believed that sovereignty rested in the general will, which resided in all citizens, but Arendt argued that this destroyed their freedom, saying that “if men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce”<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, the French revolutionaries continually strove towards a society in which all citizens would be completely liberated and fully free.

In order to create freedom and equality, the French revolutionaries attempted to radically change society by addressing the social question and attempting to eradicate poverty. Poverty, Arendt wrote, changed the driving force of the revolution and so “freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life force itself”<sup>18</sup>. Although the revolutionaries addressed poverty in order to give all citizens freedom, doing so “unleashed the terror and sent the Revolution to its doom”<sup>19</sup>. According to Arendt, it was this event which caught Marx’s eye and made him argue that revolutions are supposed to create social equality. Arendt stated that “there is no doubt that the young Marx became convinced that the reason why the French Revolution had failed to find freedom was that it had failed to solve the social question”<sup>20</sup>. Arendt disagreed with Marx; for her, the French Revolution failed precisely because it addressed the social question. However, Arendt acknowledged that, given the social conditions of the peasantry at the time of the French Revolution, it would have been difficult for the revolutionaries to stay in power and not to try to improve their social conditions. Of this, Arendt wrote: “although the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror, and that it is terror which leads revolutions to their doom, it can hardly be denied that to avoid this fatal mistake is almost impossible when a revolution breaks out under conditions of mass poverty”<sup>21</sup>. In this way, she attacks both the French and Russian Revolutions, but once again, this criticism does not result in an accusation of totalitarianism.

Another way that the questions of freedom and liberation led to the Terror was through Rousseau’s philosophy. Robespierre and the revolutionaries claimed that liberation could only be found in virtue, which “meant to have the welfare of the people in mind, to identify one’s own will with the will of the people”<sup>22</sup>. Thus liberation was no longer a tool for bringing freedom; happiness was now its goal as the revolutionaries tried to bring about liberation from poverty.<sup>23</sup> This, according to Arendt, occurred in part because of Rousseau’s emphasis on compassion, which he had said was the most human and natural of emotions. Robespierre turned to compassion because he felt that it was “the one force which could and must unite the different classes of society into one nation”<sup>24</sup>. However, Arendt argued that compassion is not an emotion which can be applied to large numbers of people; instead, it turns into pity. While pity could create the social solidarity that Robespierre wanted, “without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist”<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, in order for it to be useful, economic distinctions had to continue, which made a farce out of the revolutionaries’ quest for social equality. Instead of bringing about freedom, pity helped to support the Terror, for upon observing the mass executions during the Terror, citizens felt pity for its victims but also a strong desire to avoid their fate, making them conform even more to the wishes of the revolutionary government.<sup>26</sup>

Like Talmon, Arendt also analyzed how Rousseau’s general will influenced the French revolutionaries down the path to the Terror and helped to justify the Terror once it was in motion. Arendt wrote that since France was used to an absolute monarchy, “the very attraction of Rousseau’s theory for the men of the French Revolution was that he apparently had found a highly ingenious means to put a multitude into the place of a single person; for the general will was nothing more or less than what bound the many into one”<sup>27</sup>. While the general will came from the people, it was not identical to individual wills of citizens. In order to make this acceptable to people, Rousseau had to “presuppose the existence and rel[y] upon the unifying power of the common national enemy”<sup>28</sup>; this is similar to what nationalism does, but Arendt argued that Rousseau went further and said that the citizens’ individual wills and interests were enemies to the general will and thus to the nation. Thus, “the common enemy within the nation is the sum total of the particular interests of all citizens”<sup>29</sup>. This, to Arendt, was the true justification of the Terror for it

states that citizens who deviate from the general will ought to be treated as enemies of the state. Furthermore, this type of reasoning is a link between the French Revolution and totalitarianism, for “the theory of terror from Robespierre to Lenin to Stalin presupposes that the interest of the whole must automatically, and indeed permanently, be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen”.<sup>30</sup> This is why Talmon categorized the Terror as totalitarian, but Arendt does not arrive at that conclusion;<sup>31</sup> for while she acknowledges that totalitarian states *use* terror, she argues that they are more complex than that.

Arendt did not believe that the Terror met all of the criteria to be considered totalitarian, and she argued that many scholars oversimplified totalitarianism and thus saw it where it was not. They did this, she posited, because they “overlook[ed] the differences in principle between the restriction of freedom in authoritarian regimes, the abolition of political freedom in tyrannies and dictatorships, and the total elimination of spontaneity itself, that is, of the most general and most elementary manifestations of human freedom, at which only totalitarian regimes aim by means of their various methods of conditioning”.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that scholars have an “inclination to see “totalitarian” trends in every authoritative limitation of freedom”<sup>33</sup>, Arendt argued that totalitarianism is distinctly and inherently different from other forms of government. Furthermore, Arendt believed that it was dangerous to not recognize totalitarianism as distinct and different.

Arendt argued that one difference between totalitarianism and other forms of government is the concept of authority; totalitarianism, she claimed, signified a break in the Western tradition of authority. Authority, she wrote, “implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom”.<sup>34</sup> Authority tends to be connected to and held up by tradition, and so Arendt theorized that, because of secularization and the abandonment of religious and political traditions, modern philosophies and governments have had difficulty creating a system based on authority and have thus turned to other ways to coerce obedience from their subjects. Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, emerged out of this break with Western traditions of authority. On the other hand, Arendt believed that the French Revolution and its Terror, despite its rejection of tradition, was still within this tradition. Arendt saw Machiavelli’s political theories coming to life through Robespierre, saying that “When Robespierre justifies terror...he sounds at times as if he were repeating almost word for word Machiavelli’s famous statements on the necessity of violence for the founding of new political bodies”.<sup>35</sup> Since she places the Terror within this tradition, it automatically cannot be totalitarian for her.

In many of her works, Arendt discusses the importance of the public sphere, the space where people can engage in politics, saying that “[w]ithout a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance”.<sup>36</sup> For Arendt, political action and freedom are intrinsically linked to one another.<sup>37</sup> She argues that one of the ways that totalitarian states control their population is by destroying the public sphere, which also automatically denies them freedom. The Terror, however, does not do this; it never manages to erase the political nature of the people. Instead, the Terror over-politicizes them, making politics enter into every part of life and society. In a sense, it wears down at the private sphere by expanding the public sphere. This differentiates it from totalitarianism. Furthermore, Arendt does not necessarily see the expansion of politics and the public sphere as a negative aspect of the Terror, for she wrote that politics’ “*raison d’être*, or reason for existing, is “to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear”.<sup>38</sup> For Arendt, that space is the public sphere, and of it, she wrote: “whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, one of Talmon’s main reasons for defining the Terror as totalitarian – the fact that it politicizes all action – is not only rejected as a description of totalitarianism by Arendt but is actually a component of her own political philosophy.

Since Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism is so complex, there are many reasons why the Terror does not meet her qualifications. The lack of camps, though, is an essential way in which the Terror differs from the totalitarianism that Arendt describes. Arendt argues that terror is “brought to perfection” in concentration camps.<sup>40</sup> The phenomenon of terror began in the French Revolution’s reign of Terror, but not to the extent that totalitarian regimes would use it. For Arendt, the camps are the defining feature of totalitarianism<sup>41</sup>, for they were “meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve[d] the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing”.<sup>42</sup> One of the most important aspects of the camps to Arendt is that they were politically and militarily unnecessary.<sup>43</sup> It would have been more prudent to merely kill the people who were incarcerated in the camps, but the Nazis instead, according to Arendt, used the camps to perfect an image of totalitarianism. Murdering a person, Arendt posited, “destroys a life” but “does not destroy the fact of existence itself”.<sup>44</sup> Concentration camps, however, were designed to cut inmates off from the world of living and turn their existence into a source of torment, and only after they were completely destroyed as human beings were they killed.<sup>45</sup> Because of this, Arendt argued that “these camps are the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power”.<sup>46</sup> Since Arendt had made the point that the organization was the only original thing about totalitarianism<sup>47</sup>,

the camps clearly mark a boundary between governments which are and are not totalitarian. Since the Terror lacked the camps, Arendt could not consider it totalitarian.

#### 4. Recent Historiography

While Talmon and Arendt disagreed, their debate influenced future interpretations of the French Revolution, notably those of François Furet, a prominent French historian of the French Revolution. In describing Furet, Samuel Moyn stated that “Furet must be contextualized in the so-called anti-totalitarian movement” because that movement provided most of his sources.<sup>48</sup> Furet was similar to Talmon in that they both viewed the form of democracy, influenced by Rousseau, that the French Revolution adopted as one of the main reasons why the Terror became totalitarian.<sup>49</sup> Furet wrote that “[w]hat, for Rousseau, constituted the transition from man to citizen – a difficult, perhaps almost impossible passage”<sup>50</sup> was the goal of the revolutionary government during the Terror and that this attempt to change human nature helped lead to the totalitarianism of the Terror. Because of this, Furet argued that totalitarianism during the French Revolution was “a perversion of the democratic promise”.<sup>51</sup> Although the government claimed to be democratic, it “was inseparable from ideological orthodoxy, which forbade plurality of opinions”.<sup>52</sup> This is similar to Talmon’s and Arendt’s arguments about the role that Rousseau’s general will played in the French Revolution. Like Talmon, Furet also emphasized the similarities between the utopianism of the French Revolution and of modern totalitarian regimes, specifically that of communist Russia.

In his book *The Fascist Revolution*, George L. Mosse devoted a chapter to explaining how the origins of fascism can be found in the French Revolution. While fascism is not synonymous with totalitarianism,<sup>53</sup> the two forms of government share similarities and occasionally overlap, as in the case of Nazi Germany. Although Mosse acknowledges that fascists did not consider the French Revolution to be a critical influence, he ultimately argues that “the French Revolution did provide an important background for a fascist conception of politics”.<sup>54</sup> Mosse justifies this by pointing out that the French Revolution was the birth of nationalism, which, in turn, would give birth to fascism. Like the other scholars addressed in this essay, Mosse analyzed the role that Rousseau’s general will played in the French Revolution, especially in creating nationalism. Mosse argued that “the general will became a new religion expressed through an ascetic of politics”<sup>55</sup> and that this provided a format for fascist states to follow. Like Talmon and Furet, Mosse also discussed the utopian nature of the French Revolution, saying that “all fascisms shared the utopianism which was said to have inspired the masses during the French Revolution: the longing to create a new man or a new nation”.<sup>56</sup> For Mosse, the utopian nature of the French Revolution, along with its creation of nationalism and of a civic religion, are the reasons why it holds the origins of fascism. Although his argument is not directly about whether or not the Terror was totalitarian, it is still influenced by that debate.

#### 5. Conclusion

For Arendt, the Terror could not be totalitarian despite the crimes it committed and the people it killed because it did not destroy or even attack the essence of what it means to be human. The total abolition of spontaneity, the destruction of the human personality, the transformation of the people into an apolitical mass – that is what totalitarianism does, according to Arendt, and the Terror did not accomplish those things; it may be argued that it did not attempt to accomplish them at all. While the Terror deviated from the original goals of the French Revolution in that it created an authoritarian, even dictatorial government, it still expected its citizens to be involved in politics. It never destroyed the public sphere that made political action possible. Perhaps most importantly of all, it never created concentration camps that were devoted to the destruction of human beings as such. While Arendt recognized that her description of totalitarianism was an ideal type, she also believed that it is important to recognize that the presence of totalitarian elements does not necessarily make a government totalitarian. Arendt’s argument against labelling the Terror as totalitarian is based on the idea that totalitarianism is a novel and unique form of government that seeks to control and erase the humanity of individuals. Talmon only addresses this side of totalitarianism when he discusses the religiosity of the Jacobins, but then he argues that they sought to perfect men, not to destroy humanity. Arendt and Talmon disagree not because they saw the Terror in inherently different ways,<sup>57</sup> but because their definitions of totalitarianism are not similar, let alone identical.

Though Arendt and Talmon described the Terror in similar fashions, they reached different conclusions; Talmon saw the origins of totalitarianism in the French Revolution while Arendt did not. Her study of the Terror reflects her complex analysis of society and politics in general, and her definition of totalitarianism includes many factors, such

as the camps, which Talmon did not address. By focusing on the plurality of factors that makes a government totalitarian, Arendt was able to justify her unwillingness to label the Terror as totalitarian. Talmon's definition of totalitarianism lacks the complexity of Arendt's, and because he stated early on that Rousseau held the origins of totalitarian democracy, he did not fully consider the possibility that the Terror might not be totalitarian. Although these two scholars arrived at different conclusions, the fact that they asked the question at all has continued to influence other scholars; both Furet's and Mosse's work accept that there are some similarities between the Terror and modern totalitarian regimes. Arendt's argument that the Terror was not totalitarian, despite superficial similarities between it and modern totalitarian regimes, is more complex and persuasive, but scholars seem to have accepted Talmon's assertion that the origins of totalitarianism can be found in the Terror. This search for the origins of totalitarianism in the Terror highlights the desperate need of twentieth-century scholars to understand the totalitarian movements of their time and illustrates how contemporary events have a significant effect on the way that the past is understood.

## 6. Endnotes

- 1 It is quite likely that this influenced her later argument that camps were a defining feature of totalitarianism.
- 2 J.L. Talmon. 1960. *The origins of totalitarian democracy*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 47.
- 3 "In marrying this concept [the general will] with the principle of popular sovereignty, and popular expression, Rousseau gave rise to totalitarian democracy." Ibid, 43.
- 4 J.L. Talmon. 1970. *The origins of totalitarian democracy*. New York: Norton Library, 115.
- 5 Ibid, 81.
- 6 Ibid, 113.
- 7 Isaiah Berlin. 1958. "Two Concepts of Liberty." *Four Essays on Liberty*. 1958. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9.
- 8 "Therefore, in order for the social contract not to be an empty formality, it tacitly encompasses the commitment, which alone can give force to the rest: that whoever refuses to obey the general will be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing less than that he will be *forced to be free*. For such is the condition that, by giving each citizen to the fatherland, guarantees him against all personal dependence – a condition that makes for the ingenuity and the functioning of the political machine and that alone makes legitimate civil engagements which would otherwise be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most enormous abuses." Italics added.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau. 2012. "On the social contract". *The major political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the two Discourses and the Social contract*. trans. John T. Scott. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 175.
- 9 J.L. Talmon. 1970. *The origins of totalitarian democracy*. New York: Norton Library, 133.
- 10 Ibid, 141-142.
- 11 Hannah Arendt. 2006. *On revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 23.
- 12 Ibid, 19.
- 13 Ibid, 21.
- 14 Ibid, 23.
- 15 Freedom, for Arendt, is found only through action. Not only do all revolutions attempt to create freedom, but freedom is the reason that politics exists at all. In order for freedom to exist, politics and the public sphere must exist, and people must be liberation. But freedom arises only through voluntary action.
- Hannah Arendt. 2006. *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. London: Penguin, 147-151.
- 16 Hannah Arendt. 1963. *On revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 107.
- 17 Hannah Arendt. 2006. *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. London: Penguin, 163.
- "Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the 'general will' of an organized group. *If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.*" Italics added.
- 18 Hannah Arendt. 2006. *On revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 50.
- 19 Ibid. This could also be taken as a criticism of the communist revolution in Russia.
- 20 Ibid, 52.
- 21 Ibid, 102.
- 22 Ibid, 65.

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- 23 Hannah Arendt. 1963. *On revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 107.
- 24 Hannah Arendt. 2006. *On revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 70.
- 25 Ibid, 79.
- 26 Ibid, 80.
- 27 Ibid, 67.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid, 68.
- 30 Ibid, 69.
- 31 In her essay "Tradition and the Modern Age", Arendt writes that "[t]o hold the thinkers of the modern age, especially the nineteenth-century rebels against tradition, responsible for the structure and conditions of the twentieth century is even more dangerous than it is unjust. The implications apparent in the actual event of totalitarian domination go far beyond the most radical or most adventurous ideas of any of these thinkers". Although this quote focuses on nineteenth-century scholars, this logic can be applied to Rousseau's role in influencing the French revolutionaries. While she is not denying that Rousseau and other Enlightenment philosophers influenced Robespierre, she is arguing that neither the credit for the Revolution nor the blame for the Terror can be given to these philosophers. This is yet another key distinction between Arendt and Talmon, for Talmon does give the credit/blame to Rousseau. In fact, disregarding for a moment Arendt's definition of totalitarianism, this alone contradicts Talmon's argument, which is based on the idea that the philosophy at the time played a vital role in bringing about the Terror and therefore could be held responsible for it. Interestingly, this refusal to give responsibility to philosophy for totalitarianism or governmental crimes could have been caused from her desire to free her former teacher and lover Martin Heidegger from the taint of Nazism.
- Hannah Arendt. 2006. *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. London: Penguin, 26-27.
- 32 Ibid, 96.
- 33 Ibid, 97. Given that Talmon had already published *On the Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, this swipe at scholars by Arendt could arguably apply to him. Arendt also criticized scholars for concluding that "totalitarian government, if it is not directly identified with democracy, is seen as its almost inevitable result". Ibid. This undoubtedly is a criticism of the notion of totalitarian democracy which Talmon argued was the origin of modern totalitarianism. Arendt did not like the connection that he drew between democracy and totalitarianism. However, this blatant affiliation with democracy of the sort that Robespierre advocated also makes Arendt's objectivism subject.
- 34 Ibid, 105.
- 35 Ibid, 139.
- 36 Ibid, 147.
- 37 Hannah Arendt. 1958. *The human condition*. [Chicago]: University of Chicago Press.
- 38 Hannah Arendt. 2006. *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. London: Penguin, 153.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Hannah Arendt. 2004. *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books, 453.
- 41 Arendt acknowledged, however, that concentration camps were not "an invention of totalitarian movements". Ibid, 568. However, she still argued that they were "the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule". Ibid, 569. The first concentration camps, according to Arendt, developed in European colonies in South Africa. It was through imperialism that governments were designed to treat certain portions of the population (the indigenous people) as subhuman. Totalitarian regimes adopted and evolved the imperialist form of government with regard to the groups that they classified as unwanted, such as the Jews and political dissidents.
- 42 Ibid, 565.
- 43 Ibid, 573-574.
- 44 Ibid, 571.
- 45 Ibid, 574. "the human masses sealed off in them [the camps] are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before attempting them to eternal peace".
- 46 Ibid, 563.
- 47 "The forms of totalitarian organization, as distinguished from their ideological content and propaganda slogans, are completely new" Ibid, 477.
- 48 Samuel Moyn. 2008. "On the Intellectual Origins of Furet's Masterpiece." *The Tocqueville Review* 29, no. 2: 59-78, 59-60.
- 49 Ibid, 65.



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- 50 François Furet. 1992. *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 137.
- 51 Samuel Moyn. 2008. "On the Intellectual Origins of Furet's Masterpiece." *The Tocqueville Review* 29, no. 2: 59-78, 68.
- 52 François Furet. 1992. *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 135.
- 53 In fact, while Arendt used examples from Nazi Germany to describe totalitarianism, she viewed fascist governments as proto-totalitarian.
- Elizabeth Young-Bruehl. 2006. *Why Arendt Matters*. London: Yale University Press, 35.
- 54 George L. Mosse. 1999. *The fascist revolution: toward a general theory of fascism*. New York: H. Fertig, 69.
- 55 Ibid, 71.
- 56 Ibid, 72.
- 57 With the exception of the public sphere – though even then, they both acknowledged that the Terror politicized all of life, they just disagreed on whether or not that was a positive or negative aspect of the Terror. Arendt does not necessarily contradict the majority of Talmon's argument (for exceptions, see note 30); her critique has more to do with his choice of label. Arendt would argue that what Talmon described is an authoritarian government, not a totalitarian one, and that furthermore, authoritarianism is not a prototype for totalitarianism.