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The Age of Dictatorship: Europe 1918-1989 - Stalin and his imitators Transcript

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THE AGE OF DICTATORSHIP: EUROPE 1918-1989

STALIN AND HIS IMITATORS

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I After the Second World War was over, it took another forty-five years before dictatorship disappeared from Europe altogether. Not only were there continuing, or in the case of Greece revived dictatorial regimes in southern Europe, there was also a whole collection of dictatorships in the East. Many of the eastern European dictators became household names – not only Stalin, but also Ulbricht, Honecker, Kadar, Ceaucescu, Zhivkov, Tito, and Gomulka. They retained power for decades, and around them there grew up a massive cult of personality; their portraits were everywhere, their collected works occupied pride of place in bookshops and libraries, their speeches were printed in full in all the newspapers, their official visits filmed and broadcast in all the media. Ceaucescu even fabricated a scientific reputation for his wife sufficient to get her elected a corresponding member of the Royal Society, while Stalin actually had a whole city named after himself – Stalingrad, to become famous in the battle of that name in the winter of 1942-3.

All of these dictatorships were imposed by force; all these leaders except Stalin and his successors in the Soviet Union were installed by the Red Army following its victory over Hitler, or put in power by Moscow later on, and in that sense they were of course puppet regimes like those of Quisling or Gömbös, placed in office by Hitler during the war. Had there been free elections none of them would have come to power. All of them except Tito in Yugoslavia were obliged to be part of the Warsaw Pact, the military alliance constructed by the Soviet Union and dedicated to preserving its security against another possible invasion from the west. It was above all when, as with East Germany in 1953, Poland and Hungary in 1956, or Czechoslovakia in 1968, they threatened to break ranks in this sense that the Red Army moved in to restore the status quo.

Within this context, all of these regimes were run effectively by the national Communist Party or its equivalent. East Germany, it is true, had formally speaking a multi-party constitution, but all the other parties were closely controlled by the Communists and they were obliged to submit candidates for inclusion in a unitary, multi-party list in elections, so that electors here as elsewhere in the area had no choice of candidates to vote for. The press, the media, the judicial system, employment and virtually everything else were all run by and in the interests of the Communists. Propaganda proclaimed that all these countries, following on the Soviet model, were marching in solidarity towards a state of pure socialism, in which everything would be owned by the people, and managed for the people. Public ownership varied in extent from one country to another – it was very extensive in East Germany, for example, much less so in Poland – but everywhere it was proclaimed as the ultimate goal of society. Joint-stock companies, large firms and big landed estates were all expropriated and put under state management. Income differentials were kept to a minimum. Equality was the goal. And all of this was justified in terms of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, presented as the ultimate set of scientific principles on which human society was to be governed.

On the face of it, of course, there was no obvious reason why Marxism should lead to dictatorship, rather in fact the reverse. Classical Marxism argued that history had seen a sequence of human social structures in which each foundered on its own internal contradictions and gave way to the next in a revolution rather on the model of 1789 in France, which Marx and Engels believed brought the bourgeoisie to power and opened up the way to the triumph of capitalism and industry. This in turn gave rise to an ever-growing, ever-more exploited and impoverished working class, which would eventually rise up against its bourgeois oppressors and establish a socialist society in which everything would be owned in common. In this situation the state would gradually wither away, opening up the road to the ultimate form of human society, communism. When dictatorships did appear, like that of Napoleon III in France, it was, argued Marx and Engels, because there was an equilibrium of class forces, and so the bourgeoisie had to bring someone to power who could impose its interests by force. It was a strictly temporary expedient. In this vision, everything was ultimately dependent on the stage of development reached by the economy. But in Russia, Lenin's interpretation of Marxism departed fatefully from this doctrine by insisting that the intellectual vanguard of the socialist movement could as it were hasten the whole process of development, even, in 1917, bypassing the bourgeois stage altogether. Lenin effectively redefined social categories in political terms, so that 'bourgeois' or still more 'petty-bourgeois' became terms for those who opposed him, and "working-class" was reserved for loyal members of his own party.

That was because, "objectively", to use a favourite communist term, nobody who opposed the Communists could be working-class or proletarian, because the Communist Party was the only movement fighting for the proletarian revolution. What was 'objectively' in favour of revolution was of course defined by the Communists themselves, in a neat circularity of argument that placed complete definitional power in the hands of whoever was able to determine policy and doctrine. Uncoupling politics from the stages of social and economic development rendered them essentially arbitrary, in other words. Finally, the idea that all of this was a scientific, irrefutable, proven doctrine gave primacy to those who could claim to be intellectually sophisticated enough to

understand it: hence the constant need of Communist leaders to show their intellectual credentials by writing works of philosophy, economics and so on and publishing them in multi-volume collected editions. Although they would have been horrified by the idea, it was thus in the end the example of Marx and Engels themselves that opened the way for later individuals, from Lenin onwards, to claim supreme power because they had achieved a supreme understanding of the laws of motion of human society, laws, of course which they defined themselves. Communist dictators were thus always portrayed in propaganda as servants of a greater cause, as implementing a wider set of more impersonally determined policies and ideas.

II

It was – to use a favourite phrase of historians – no coincidence that a Communist dictatorship was first established in Russia. In the vast, overwhelmingly agricultural territories of the Tsarist Empire, civil society was poorly developed, there were no democratic traditions, and the institutions of the state were ruled autocratically by one man. Those institutions were themselves poorly equipped to face the challenges of the modern world, and failed the test of war, in the Crimea in 1854-56, against Japan in 1905, and above all in the First World War. In the first two cases they tried to reform themselves, but failed to replace the autocracy with a significantly more participatory system of government; in the third they collapsed altogether. In February 1917 the mainly middle-class politicians of the centre and moderate left took over to try and wage war against Germany more effectively, but they too failed, and when Lenin and the Bolsheviks staged an armed *coup* in the capital city the following October, they met with widespread popular approval because they were the only group who promised to bring the war to an end. It took four more years for them to establish control over the country, in a bitterly fought civil war in which hundreds of thousands were killed, followed by a widespread famine in which perhaps two million people died. In the course of these conflicts the Bolsheviks re-established control over much of the Tsarist Empire and created a new constitutional system, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, bringing the whole area from Siberia and Central Asia to Georgia and the Ukraine under Moscow's control.

Lenin's authority amongst his colleagues was undisputed, but in the early 1920s his health was declining and in 1924 he died, in part of the after-effects of an assassination attempt. An interregnum followed, while his former subordinates jockeyed for position. As believers in the theory that revolutions followed basically the same pattern everywhere, they all feared a potential equivalent of Napoleon, and the best bet here was Trotsky, the revolution's military leader and a charismatic speaker and writer. He was pushed out, and eventually forced into exile. The struggle for power in the leadership meshed with conflicts over policy. To aid postwar economic recovery, Lenin had allowed a limited measure of private enterprise in the so-called 'New Economic Policy', which resulted in high growth rates but also took the Soviet Union away from its ideals of equality and state planning. After a number of twists and turns, a figure emerged who championed the return of Soviet rigour: Josef Stalin. Unlike Hitler, Stalin did not gain power through his oratory or his political campaigning; Stalin on the contrary was the quiet, industrious backroom boy, the party secretary for whom no task was too demeaning, no job too tedious. While the big beasts in the Bolshevik power jungle strutted and demonstrated their prowess on the congress podium, Stalin worked tirelessly behind the scenes, putting his trusted lieutenants in key positions, and creating a network of patronage by fixing jobs for people in the lower echelons of the party hierarchy.

By the end of the 1920s Stalin had maneuvered his rivals out of the way and become leader of the party. Like all Communist dictators, he was known officially not as the 'Leader' but by his formal office 'First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)' – even the headship of state, the state presidency, was held by someone else. The fiction was maintained that it was the party, and through it the urban and rural working classes whose interests it represented, that wielded power. In the course of the 1930s, however, this turned into a personal dictatorship of terrifying proportions. Stalin used the state's extensive secret police apparatus to enforce collectivization in the countryside, creating big state farms out of small private holdings. These would deliver essential grain to the towns, where he now forced the pace of industrialization. The policy was only partially successful; the peasants resisted, burning their crops and killing their livestock rather than giving them up to the state, while the collective farms were inefficient and poorly organized; and many of the most industrious and productive small farmers were shot by the secret police as 'kulaks' (exploitative capitalist peasants). In the Ukraine, another massive famine followed. The economy did grow, but no faster than it had done under the New Economic Policy. The essential difference is that under Stalin, industrialization was state-driven rather than pushed on by private enterprise.

Stalin punished the mistakes and blunders of industrialization, of which there were plenty, with a ruthless policy of terror. 'Saboteurs' and 'wreckers' surely had to be responsible, since the Party's own policy was 'objectively correct'. Capitalist forces outside the Soviet Union thus surely had to be conspiring to undermine it. Show trials of those supposedly responsible began almost as soon as Stalin came to power. After the murder, probably by local party rivals, of the popular Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov in 1934, Stalin began a purge of the party, throwing out thousands of long-term party members and replacing them with his own people. This went together with a series of bizarre show trials in which his one-time rivals for the leadership, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and many other leading figures in the party, confessed to having been working for foreign powers or acting on behalf of Trotsky. They were induced to confess by a mixture of threats to their families, physical torture and abuse, and loyalty to the Soviet system – which, if it required them to sacrifice themselves, was surely justified in doing so, or at least so some of them seem to have reasoned, like the hero in Arthur Koestler's chilling novel *Darkness at Noon*. All of them were condemned to death and shot. In 1937-38 the mass purges deepened and widened. Stalin would personally issue lists of tens of thousands of people to be arrested and killed, quotas of shootings that his secret police agents had to fulfil or be arrested themselves. About one and a

half million people were arrested at the height of the purges, in 1937-38, of whom half were shot and the rest sent to labour camps in Siberia, already full to bursting with those arrested earlier on. Over the whole period of Stalin's power, from 1929 to 1953, it has been estimated that no fewer than two and three quarter million people died in the camps. Conditions were terrible, the aim of providing forced labour always secondary to the main purpose of eliminating any possible opposition to Stalin's rule. The purges were hugely counter-productive; they included military leaders, munitions factory managers, experienced administrators, professionals and many others whose lack the Soviet Union was to feel acutely in the early 1940s as the confrontation with Nazi Germany became inevitable.

These purges clearly owed something to Stalin's own suspicious nature and reflected his long record of the ruthless employment of violence in pursuit of his aims, evident for example in his activities during the civil war. But they owed more in the end to the paranoid atmosphere in which the Bolshevik movement had grown up, with Tsarist agents everywhere, including in its own ranks, and to the uncompromising political stance first brought to the party by Lenin, for whom, as for his successors, anyone who was not wholly with the party must be wholly against it. It was only as the looming threat of Nazi invasion became unmistakable that Stalin began to slow down then stop the purges, turning his attention instead to strengthening the Soviet Union's defences, and then, on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Poland, buying time by concluding the Nazi-Soviet Pact with Hitler, which allowed him to deepen his defensive line by taking over the eastern part of Poland and the Baltic states. Stalin was convinced that Hitler would not invade, and on 22 June 1941, when 3 million German, Romanian and allied troops crossed the Soviet border, he suffered what seemed like a nervous breakdown. Hundreds of thousands of Red Army troops were taken prisoner, and the German advance seemed unstoppable. Stalin retreated to his dacha and broke off communication with his Politburo, the governing body of the Soviet Communist Party. When, finally the Politburo sent a delegation to talk to him, he thought they had come to arrest him.

When Stalin's Politburo had managed to reassure the Soviet leader that far from coming to arrest him they had resolved that there should be a State Defence Committee with him in the chair, he recovered his nerve. He had indeed suffered a breakdown; but also, like the medieval Tsar, Ivan the Terrible, he also had gone into 'exile' partly in order to demonstrate that he was indispensable. His retreat had also given him the chance to rethink his role. On 3 July 1941 he spoke to the Soviet people over the radio, for the first time not as Communist dictator but as patriotic leader. 'Brothers and sisters,' he said, 'friends!' This was an entirely new note. He went so far as to admit that the Red Army had been unprepared for the attack. He admitted that the Germans were 'wicked and perfidious...heavily armed with tanks and artillery'. But they would not prevail. The Soviet people had to organize civil defence and mobilize every ounce of energy to defeat the enemy. It was necessary to form partisan groups behind the lines to cause as much damage and disruption as possible. Silence, lies and evasion, people felt, had at last been replaced with some kind of truth. The speech's patriotic appeal was all the more powerful because people were already beginning to learn the bitter realities of German occupation. Stories of the horrors of the prisoner-of-war camps mingled with eyewitness reports of the mass shooting of civilians and the burning of villages to produce in the still-retreating ranks of the Red Army a determination to fight the enemy that was almost entirely absent in the first chaotic days of the war. Soviet soldiers and civilians began to listen to Stalin's new, patriotic message and fight back.

After issuing draconian orders for the punishment of shirkers and deserters and having Dmitri Pavlov, the commander of the Red Army on the western front, tried by a summary court-martial and shot, the Soviet leader began to realise, as he told his officers in October 1941, that 'persuasion, not violence' should be used to motivate the troops. Communist Party propaganda began to emphasise the defence not of the revolution but of the motherland. The party newspaper, *Pravda* ('Truth'), dropped the slogan 'Workers of the World, Unite!' from its masthead and replaced it with 'Death to the German Invaders!'. As the German armies drove on relentlessly towards Moscow, Stalin's staff prepared to evacuate. After reading a biography of the Tsarist general Kutuzov, who had abandoned Moscow in the face of Napoleon's invasion, the Soviet leader decided that to leave would cause panic. It was one thing to burn a small early nineteenth-century town to the ground, another thing altogether to surrender the vast conurbation that had become the modern Soviet capital. Stalin countermanded the orders of his staff. 'No evacuation', he said. 'We'll stay here until victory.' Under Stalin's leadership, the new State Defence Committee began to get a grip on the situation. Factories and their workers and equipment were hurriedly evacuated from areas threatened by the Germans, taken hundreds of miles east to the Urals, and reassembled again in new industrial centres that had sprung up during the 1930s to begin war production with redoubled energy. Most important of all, perhaps, unlike Hitler, Stalin decided to leave the detailed conduct of war to his generals. Fortified by equipment and supplies from the USA transported by naval convoys to Russia's northern ports, the Soviet forces were soon outgunning the German army, they had more men, better tanks, and more effective weaponry. Following the immensely destructive battle of Stalingrad, the Red Army advanced steadily and reached Berlin in April 1945.

III

After the war, Stalin became more paranoid than ever. Many eastern European states reinstated democracies in 1945, and local Communists were repeatedly defeated in free elections. Stalin feared a western, capitalist presence in east-central Europe and used the presence of the Red Army to undermine democratic governments, taking them over by steady, stealthy pressure until by the end of the 1940s every east European country was under Communist control. The leading anti-Communist figures were forced into exile, imprisoned or, like the Bulgarian agrarian leader Nikola Petkov, tried on trumped-up charges and executed. From 1949 to 1953 Stalin imposed the main characteristics of his rule on eastern Europe; cities in all of them apart from Czechoslovakia

were named after Stalin (Katowice in Poland for instance became Stalinogorod); the Czechs renamed their highest mountain 'Stalin Peak' instead. Secret police forces sprang up behind the scenes, there were show trials of oppositional figures, and purges within local parties, most notably of Rudolf Slansky, a Communist veteran in Czechoslovakia. In Germany former Nazi concentration camps were opened to house the newly arrested. Even in Yugoslavia, where the Communist leader Tito repudiated Stalin, there were mass arrests and killings, and new prison and labour camps were opened up. Industrialization and in many though not all countries the collectivization of agriculture were forced on through Stalin-inspired Five-Year-Plans.

All these policies were slowed down, though not everywhere brought to a halt, with the death of Stalin in 1953. Stalin himself had been contemplating a new round of purges, but these now never happened. Instead, in the inevitably ensuing power-struggle in the Soviet Union, the eventual winner, Nikita Khrushchev, announced at the secret 20th party congress in 1956 that it was time to repudiate the legacy of Stalin. The cult of his personality had been excessive; too many people had been unjustly arrested and killed. The CIA soon obtained a copy of the speech and its contents became known everywhere. Yet the belief, evident in the attempted liberalization of the political system in Hungary and Poland in 1956, that the Soviet Union was relaxing its grip on Eastern Europe, proved to be mistaken, as it was again in 1968 with the suppression by the Red Army and its allies from the Warsaw Pact of the liberal Communist 'Prague Spring' in Czechoslovakia. What had happened in the Soviet bloc was in many ways the exact opposite of what had happened in the prewar and wartime dictatorships of western and central Europe; the system had become ossified, immobile, and unchangeable. Dictatorships like those of Hitler and Mussolini, even more conservative authoritarian regimes like those of Admiral Horthy or General Metaxas, had an unmistakable element of dynamism about them; all of them were driven by nationalism and aimed to a greater or lesser degree at increasing the power and territory of their nation. By contrast, the Warsaw Pact was in essence a gigantic defensive system designed to surround the Soviet Union with a ring of satellite states, in which no real change would be allowed because it might open the way to the advance of capitalism and the destruction of the Soviet system.

Those who ran the Soviet regime and its satellites in the decades following the death of Stalin were almost all veteran Communists who had gained their commitment at the height of Stalinism. However cynical their propaganda became, they really do seem to have believed in the Communist idea. Yet after Stalin's death, show trials and purges largely came to an end, the labour camps slowly emptied, and any last remaining ambition to spread communism to other parts of the world was in practice abandoned, unless a regime in difficulties, like that of Fidel Castro in Cuba, more or less begged for Soviet aid. It was above all perhaps in Africa that Soviet foreign policy saw its major potential, in the search for allies and client states, as resistance and independence movements found in Communism a doctrine that suited their purposes, but its efforts were mostly less than wholly successful, and in any case the rewards seldom outweighed the expense. The fundamental problem with the Soviet system was that in leveling society down in the interests of broad social equality, it removed any incentive for most people to work harder, gain more qualifications, innovate and invent. After the oil crisis of 1974, the Communist dictatorships began to stagnate, unable to adjust to the new, harsher world economic climate. Within a decade they were all in serious economic difficulties. Younger generations felt stymied by the continuing dominance of the old Communists. In Poland only a military coup in 1981 prevented labour unrest, spearheaded by the Solidarity trade union, from destabilizing the regime. In Albania, the hardline Communist regime, led by the Spanish Civil War veteran Enver Hoxha, sought support from Mao's China; in Romania the willful dictatorship of the Ceauscescu produced hugely expensive and megalomaniacal building plans that aimed to concentrate the entire population in vast housing blocks.

What toppled the whole system was the accession to power in the Soviet Union of a younger generation of leaders, above all Mikhail Gorbachev, who recognized that the ailing economy could no longer support the military occupation of eastern Europe. Gorbachev proclaimed the famous "Sinatra doctrine" - every country in the Warsaw Pact could do things its own way - and the twin policies of *Glasnost*, or openness, and *Perestroika*, restructuring. Once the floodgates were opened, there was no going back; Communist regimes everywhere were transformed peacefully into democratic systems, as in Hungary, or fell to a wave of popular unrest, as in Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Only in Romania was there serious violence, as the Ceauscescu offered resistance, were arrested and were executed in front of the tv cameras. With the fall of Communism, the age of dictatorship in Europe was finally over.

Of course, the transition to democracy has not always been smooth. The end of Communist repression opened the way for the emergence of nationalism, sometimes encouraged by unscrupulous post-Communist leaders like Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, while the influx of unrestricted market capitalism caused huge impoverishment and gave rise to massive organized criminality especially in Russia and Albania. In East Germany the state's total lack of legitimacy was quickly exposed by the withdrawal of Soviet backing for the regime, and it quickly merged with the West. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, not only did Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia reassert their independence, but so too did Belarus and the Ukraine, as well as a series of nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In Yugoslavia, by contrast, the resurgence of Serbian and Croatian nationalism led to a series of bloody conflicts in the 1990s whose legacy lives on in the region today; only Slovenia managed to establish its independence peacefully and without bloodshed. Everywhere the disappointments of the transition to capitalist, free-market democracy led to the emergence of post-Communist parties, seeking to restore in a modernized form some of the lost certainties of the past, from the welfare state to the central management of the economy. In Russia in particular, the chaos of the post-Communist years has led to an authoritarian solution, with increasingly severe curbs on civil freedoms as well as growing state control over the economy. Only in

Czechoslovakia was the transition managed skillfully enough for this to be avoided, though the split of the country into two parts, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, could not be avoided.

What this points to, once more, is the importance of deep-seated democratic traditions, present in the Czech Republic for example but neither in Serbia nor in Russia. The legacy of dictatorship went back far beyond 1945. And yet, in western Europe after the end of the Second World War, the transition to democracy proved remarkably smooth. France, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Holland, and Belgium all restored parliamentary systems and reinstated democracy without difficulty, not least because they had already enjoyed decades of parliamentary democracy before 1940, or in Italy's case 1924. Germany, however, was a different case. If all of these other countries apart from Italy could ascribe the destruction of democracy to invasion by a foreign dictatorship, the same could certainly not be said of Germany, and many thought in 1945 that given the fact that Germans had lived under an authoritarian system of rule under the Kaiser, and started not one but two world wars, the task of managing the transition was going to be a lot more difficult. In the final section of this lecture, I want to turn to the specific case of Germany after 1945, therefore, and to show the importance of the transition from dictatorship to democracy for the present day, I want to compare it with the current situation in Iraq, where everyone, whatever their views on the Anglo-American invasion, must surely wish that President Bush's ambition to create a functioning and peaceful democracy meets with success.

IV

As the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw reminded us a few months ago, building democracy on the ruins of dictatorship takes a long time. We should not expect it to happen in Iraq overnight, he said. After all, he pointed out, it took four years to create a democratic political system in West Germany after the defeat of the Third Reich. And indeed, since 1949, when the institutions of the present German state were created, Germany has never looked back. Political stability was underpinned by the 'economic miracle', and the federal German state proved extraordinarily successful in generating a broad consensus about the way in which political disagreements should be worked out and reconciled. The Western Allies, Britain, France and the United States, could feel justifiably proud of their role as midwives to the democratization process.. Why should we not, therefore, look forward to the same kind of thing happening in Iraq?

Yet there are plenty of reasons to suppose that democratizing Iraq is going to be much more difficult than democratizing Germany ever was. To begin with, whatever wartime propagandists argued, Germany did in fact possess long, deep-seated democratic and parliamentary traditions, stretching back to the 1848 Revolution and embodied above all in the Social Democratic Party. The Kaiser's Germany, for all its refusal to concede the sovereignty of parliament, provided decades of popular party politics, national and local elections, and reasoned political debate in legislative assemblies. There was a more or less free press, and restrictions on freedom of speech, while often irksome, were relatively mild. The ill-fated Weimar Republic took up many of these traditions and carried them further. Across twelve years of the Nazi dictatorship, German political culture could look back on many decades of developing democratic practice and civil freedoms before 1933.

Iraq, however, almost entirely lacks these traditions. Democratization more or less has to start from scratch. Moreover, legitimizing democracy was relatively easy in Germany because the traditions and institutions created in 1949 were essentially German traditions, from federalism to proportional representation. The Allies did not seek to import, say, British or American constitutional and political institutions into the country. They based their approach, after some argument, not on the view that Germans were irredeemably wicked and politically incompetent, but on the theory that there were two Germanies – the Germany of Beethoven and Goethe, of the 1848 revolution and the Weimar Republic, on the one hand, and the Germany of Bismarck and the Kaiser, of militarism and war, of Hitler and the Nazis on the other. It was their self-imposed task to rescue the former and repress the latter, and that meant respecting German traditions that were judged to be benevolent. In Iraq, however, democratic traditions must be either invented or imported. It will take far longer for them to strike root. And then there is the religious problem. Superficially, both countries look perhaps surprisingly similar in this respect, with the Sunni-Shia division in Iraq finding an obvious parallel in the Protestant-Catholic divide in Germany. Throughout much of modern German history, the Protestants more or less ran things at the centre, just like the Sunnis in Iraq, leaving the Catholics feeling disadvantaged and dispossessed. Generating consensus across the religious divide proved easy enough in Germany, so why not in Iraq too? The dominant Protestants in Germany were always in the majority, however, unlike the dominant Sunnis in Iraq. They could not be portrayed as an obstacle to majority rule, rather the reverse; and their fears of being overwhelmed by a rival denomination were correspondingly far less than those of the Sunnis are at the moment. Moreover, interdenominational violence in Germany had come to an effective end in 1648, three centuries before the creation of the Federal Republic, with the Treaty of Westphalia that brought the disastrous Thirty Years' War to an end. By contrast, there are troubling signs that people are becoming ever more willing to kill each other for religious reasons in Iraq.

True, the religious divide in Germany had given rise to a political divide, between the Catholic Centre Party and the Protestant parties, chiefly the German Nationalists, thus preventing the emergence of an interdenominational Conservative Party and fatally dividing the middle-class opposition to Hitler. While the Catholic vote held up against the Nazis' electoral onslaught in the early 1930s, the Protestant vote collapsed in spectacular fashion. Before long, however, middle-class Protestants were beginning to regret voting for the Nazis, as Hitler's dictatorship unleashed a fierce onslaught against both Churches, trying to force the Protestants to accept a version of the Bible that dispensed with the 'Jewish' Old Testament and propagating the view that Jesus was an 'Aryan'. When this failed, the Nazis increasingly assailed both Catholic and Protestant Churches, imprisoning

large numbers of clergy and encouraging their supporters to leave the Church altogether. The German Churches' resistance to Nazism was less than robust. But after 1945, both Protestant and Catholic politicians recognized the dangers of continuing the religious division between the parties of the right. Resurrecting Christian values on a conservative, cross-denominational basis, they thought, would not only provide a bulwark against the looming threat of Communism as the Cold War got under way, it would also provide a sound basis for overcoming the evil legacy of Nazism. Thus the Christian Democratic Party was born, and its leaders provided Germany with a stable government for most of the next two decades.

The signs of such a reconciliation happening in Iraq are at present very remote, despite the fact that Saddam Hussein, like Hitler, was a secular dictator under whose rule the religious could only express their beliefs in the most limited way. However, Saddam did at least pay lip-service to Islam, particularly later on in his rule, and he was identified with one religious group, the Sunnis, as Hitler, who regarded all forms of Christianity with a mixture of hatred and contempt, was not. Moreover, the occupying powers in Iraq, unlike the Allied forces in postwar Germany, are from a different religious background altogether, allowing Saddam's former supporters to give their resistance increased legitimacy as part of an Islamic struggle against a foreign crusade.

The absence of any armed resistance against the occupying powers is indeed, in retrospect, perhaps the most striking feature of the postwar years in Germany. Despite Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels's attempt to organize a resistance movement, under the name of 'Werewolf', to carry the struggle on after he was gone, nothing happened. The cult of Hitler was so all-pervasive in the Third Reich that when he committed suicide, the major reason for supporting Nazism vanished overnight. The Nazis had preached with manic insistency the primacy of might over right: victory went to the strongest, power justified anything. Their defeat turned this belief against them. And it was a defeat far more comprehensive than that suffered by Saddam Hussein. Germany's cities were obliterated, millions of Germans were dead, wounded or prisoners of war. Nazism had led to nothing but death and destruction. Moreover, Nazism and fascism had been destroyed everywhere else in Europe by 1945. There was no prospect of foreign fighters coming to Germany to aid what they saw as their fascist brothers resisting foreign occupation. Violent Islamic extremism is very different from European fascism - apart from anything else, it has far less popular support than the fascists did - but it is alive and well in many countries outside Iraq. Like the German problem in 1945, the Iraq problem in 2006 can only be solved within a regional framework, but the regional framework of the former, with democratic states to the north, west and south, was far more conducive to a settlement than the regional framework of the latter. And the sheer numbers of Allied troops in postwar Germany were so overwhelming that for all the chaos created by millions of displaced persons and refugees milling around in the country, isolating and arresting violent troublemakers did not prove too difficult when they actually did emerge.

The huge Allied presence in Germany was a reflection of the fact, of course, that they had just won a war fought over more than five years that had been caused by Hitler's invasion of other European countries in a bid to control the entire Continent and thereafter the world. Mercifully, neither of the two Gulf Wars was comparable in length or destructiveness, but this reflected the fact that while Saddam Hussein at times posed a regional threat, he never aimed at anything more: for all its oil resources, Iraq could never be more than a regional power, in contrast to Germany, one of the strongest economies in the world in the 1930s, and a power that managed to hold both America and Russia at bay for well over three years of all-out war. Nazism's ambitions were boundless; its fall was correspondingly complete. Added to this total destruction of all legitimacy for Nazism was popular guilt at the mass murder of nearly six million Jews, more than three million Soviet prisoners of war, and millions more civilians across Europe, a guilt brought home to the Germans by re-education, denazification and war crimes trials. All these began very quickly after the war, and they undoubtedly had an effect, even though it was not perhaps as great as the Allies hoped. Many if not most Germans tried to compensate for their feelings of guilt by regarding themselves as victims too - of bombing raids, or of mass expulsions from the east - but the guilt was there none the less under the surface. It could not in the end be heaped upon Hitler alone, particularly because Germans knew they had mostly supported him for much of the time.

By contrast, Saddam's crimes, appalling though they certainly were, were overwhelmingly committed against his own people, who therefore cannot see the need to feel guilty about them. Indeed most of them felt oppressed by Saddam, and though there is a pro-Saddam resistance in Iraq, it seems to be far less popular and far less important than the violent movements launched in the name of Islamic sectarianism. All the signs are, too, that while the Allies were preparing thoroughly and meticulously for post-war reconstruction in Germany for a number of years before 1945 - they had had over half a decade to do so, and used their time well - postwar reconstruction in Iraq has been done on the hoof, with little thought or time given to it beforehand: after all, the Second Gulf War was launched relatively suddenly, and, crucially, it was over extremely quickly, giving the Allies little time to think about what they would do after it was won. As a result, everyone concedes, many mistakes were made that will take a good deal of time and effort to rectify.

Like Germany in 1945, Iraq in 2006 is a relatively new country with strong centrifugal forces, and it faces an uncertain future. In 1949, Germany had been in existence for just over 70 years, while at the time of the Second Gulf War Iraq had been in existence for just over 80. But there the similarities end: Germany could look back on centuries of political existence in pre-national form (the German Confederation, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation) while Iraq had none. German nationalism was a powerful force, so powerful indeed that its all-pervasive nature in German political culture was what sustained Nazism's legitimacy probably more than anything else. In 1945 it was chastened and defeated, but still far more powerful than any possible alternative

such as Bavarian particularism or Rhenish separatism. The expulsion of 11 million ethnic Germans from eastern Europe and the redrawing of internal regional boundaries, with the abolition of Prussia and the creation of entirely new entities like Lower Saxony, completed the weakening of provincial identities already begun by the Nazis. The partition of Germany into East and West could not appear to most Germans as anything more than the temporary product of foreign occupation. If anything, it encouraged a sense of cohesion in West Germany in the hope that reunification would happen one day, as indeed it eventually did.

In Iraq, by contrast, it is the Allies that appear to some to be holding the country together. Nationalism has never been as pervasive as it has been in Germany, and regional divisions run far deeper. Saddam's murderous oppression of the Shias in the south and the Kurds in the north bore little relation to Hitler's murderous oppression of minorities in Germany: he did not direct his hostility towards particular areas of the country, but to groups, from Jews to homosexuals, who existed in every region. Not surprisingly, Kurds and Shias, now released from their bondage under Saddam, see in a high degree of autonomy the only guarantee that they will not be similarly oppressed in the future. How their aspirations are to be reconciled with those of the Sunnis, who were not oppressed as Sunnis, however much they were oppressed for other, more general reasons, is a problem that so far nobody has been able to overcome. Finally, of course, there was the Cold War, which convinced West Germans, already instilled with fear of the Soviets by a decade or more of Nazi propaganda, that however bad their lot, it would be far worse under Stalin. After 1949 Allied troops remained in military occupation of West Germany for another four decades and more, but very quickly this changed its function from one of insuring against a resurgence of Nazism to one of defending West Germany against the Soviet threat, so whatever public resentment their might have been amongst West Germans against the Allies' military presence soon disappeared.

Building democracy in Iraq may thus prove to be a far more problematic enterprise than it was in the corresponding situation in Germany after 1945. Jack Straw was right to point to the fact that four years elapsed between the death of Hitler and the creation of the West German state, though in fact regional democracies had been up and running effectively for some time before the passing of the Basic Law in 1949. But if he was holding out the prospect of a functioning democracy being created in the same space of time in Iraq, he may have been taking the wrong lessons from history, as politicians so often do. There are many dictatorships still functioning in the world today, in Africa, in Central Asia, and in other parts of the world as well. Their number may have diminished, and some areas such as Latin America and Europe may have seen the last of them. But there are enough to give the lie so far at any rate to the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama's claim a decade and a half ago that history had come to an end because the collapse of Communism heralded the universal triumph of liberal democracy across the globe. In this brief series of lectures, I have studied the dictatorships of one particular period – the twentieth century – in one particular part of the world – Europe – to try and explain how they arose, what they did, and how they differed one from another. A French historian once said that to explain everything is to excuse everything, but I hope that in the case of these lectures that's not the case. The age of dictatorship brought Europe untold misery, destruction and death. It meant that in the words of another historian, Europe for much of this period was a "Dark Continent", and we should be grateful that the Continent has now put this part of its history behind it and can look to living in a better, more democratic future.