
Conference Report

Coercion and Consent:

A Comparative Study of

‘Mass Dictatorship’

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What is the difference between pre-modern despotism and modern dictatorship? The answer is simple: despotism does not need massive backing from below, but dictatorship presupposes the support of the masses. This simple distinction is the starting point of the three-year ‘mass dictatorship’ project, launched in December 2002 with the financial support of the Korea Research Foundation and Hanyang University, Seoul. The project aims to position Korean debates about coming to terms with its dictatorial past in the context of other countries’ experiences with dictatorship.

The term ‘mass dictatorship’ is meant to describe the mobilisation of the masses by the dictatorship and their often voluntary participation in and support for dictatorial regimes, be they fascist, authoritarian or communist. The first international conference of the project was held at Hanyang University between 24 and 26 October 2003, and was dedicated to the comparative study of ‘mass dictatorship’. The fourteen scholars from eight countries presented case studies of Nazism, Italian Fascism, Francoism, Austrian Nazism, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Ukraine, and the Japanese total war system and the developmental dictatorship in South Korea. There were three main sessions, respectively covering case studies in western Europe, eastern Europe and Asia.

Jie-Hyun Lim (Hanyang University, Seoul), the organiser of the conference, delivered a keynote address entitled ‘Mapping mass dictatorship in historical perspectives’. He argued that the widespread support for dictatorships puts a question mark against the usefulness of the totalitarian paradigm. Its obsession with differentiating between the few perpetrators (the dictator and his cronies) and the many victims (‘the people’) cannot capture the key characteristics of ‘mass dictatorship’. Marxist explanations of fascism suffer from the same inability to understand modern dictatorships and their rootedness in diverse forms of popular support. There have been exceptions to the rule, such as Antonio Gramsci, whose idea of fascism included the notion that it was entrenched deeply among the people and aimed at achieving cultural hegemony by other means than simple repression of ‘the people’.

The session on western Europe started with a paper by Michael Wildt (Institute for Social Research, Hamburg) on Nazism. Wildt emphasised the way in which those who found themselves on the right side of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* supported many aspects of the attempt to create a racial state in the 1930s. The Nazis oppressed those who were to be excluded from the racial nation they sought to create. But they were genuinely popular among those who were promised a place in that nation. Yong-Woo Kim (Hanyang University, Seoul) presented the Italian case. Mussolini's vision of a Fascist utopia was equally able to produce a broad cultural consensus among Italians. As with Nazi Germany, the state developed considerable potential for oppression, but it ruled most effectively where it could rely on the voluntary support of the masses. Francoism is normally not regarded as fascism. It is defined most commonly as an 'authoritarian regime', 'Catholic bonapartism', 'Catholic fascism' and 'modern despotism'. According to Young-Jo Hwangbo (Hanyang University, Seoul), the 'resistantist interpretation' of Francoism as an oppressive regime opposed by the vast majority of Spaniards made the transition to a democratic regime from the 1970s onwards easier. More recently, however, Spanish historians have also paid attention to the existence of consent and support among the masses. The case of Austrian Nazism was presented by Hiroko Mizuno (Osaka University, Osaka). She emphasised that the image of Austria as victim of Hitler cannot be squared with the support of the vast majority of the Austrian people for Nazism during and after the *Anschluss* of 1938. Finally, Stefan Berger compared the total war system in Germany and Britain. Looking at political governance in wartime, the mobilisation of the war economy and diverse means of generating popular support, he suggested that Britain organised its wartime economy more efficiently than Germany. Because of its credibility as a democratic political culture Britain was also in a better position to demand greater sacrifices from its citizens. In the discussion of the western Europe session Konrad Jarausch (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam, and University of North Carolina) raised a number of issues which structured the debate. First, he asked for reflection on how we are to classify dictatorships. Second, he underlined the importance of emphasising the continuous interplay between coercion and consent, not only at a societal level but also within a single person. Third, he encouraged the conference participants to reflect more deeply on the diverse motivations behind consent and compliance. Finally he emphasised the importance of memories for the framing of histories of dictatorship.

The second day of the conference was dedicated to the east European session, comprising case studies of Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Alexander V. Golubev (Institute of Russian History, Moscow) argued that, by the late 1920s, the Soviet dictatorship still possessed considerable popular approval. Aimed at politicising the masses, the Stalinist regime secured its popularity by promising a huge growth of social mobility and rapid modernisation. In his comprehensive sketch of Ukrainian historiography, Volodymyr Kravchenko (Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv) concluded that the masses' consent to the Soviet regime is currently being written out of the Ukrainian history textbooks, which rely on simplistic stories of a communist regime being imposed from above and

maintained over the 'Ukrainian people' by means of terror. The attempts by isolated Ukrainian intellectuals to explain the widespread popular support among Ukrainians for Stalinism are being widely disregarded in the public sphere. The Polish case, presented by Katarzyna Sobolewska (Pedagogical University, Cracow), is not so different from that of its eastern neighbour. The efforts of Polish Stalinism to instil communist values and norms in the people remained a failure, but many Poles were more than happy after 1945 to live in a state with hardly any ethnic minorities. Their acceptance of the state and the communists' willingness not to interfere with religion and the private sphere resulted in relatively high levels of conformity with really existing socialism in Poland. Taku Shinohara (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo) scrutinised historical consciousness in Czech society after 1990, where Nazism and Stalinism have been regarded as viruses infecting the Czech national body. Only following a prolonged period of illness did the Czech national movement return to full health and strength. But the simplicity of any such ideas are revealed when one considers Czechoslovak plans for a concentration camp for Romas in 1939 – before the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia. In his stimulating presentation about really existing socialism in the GDR, Martin Sabrow proposed to differentiate between 'open consent' as an empirical category of political practices and 'structural consensus' as a category of inner workings and ruling discourse. Sabrow explored various facets of consensus as cultural phenomena in the mass media, literature, law courts and academic institutions of the GDR. Behind a façade of ritualised consent, he concluded, lurked the 'loyal criticism' of some communist intellectuals and the general dissatisfaction among ordinary East Germans. Yet an increasing number of East Germans felt some kind of attachment to the GDR during the 1960s and 1970s, which cannot adequately be explained by (West German) references to the GDR as '*Unrechtsstaat*'.

There were two presentations at the conference on East Asian experiences of dictatorship. Byung-Ju Hwang (Hanyang University, Seoul) and Namhee Lee (University of California, Berkeley) analysed the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee in Korea. Posing as a representative of the oppressed and underprivileged, Park made use of the egalitarian modernisation discourse to provide a forum for popular consent. Poor peasants responded enthusiastically to the call for modernisation launched by the 'New Village Movement'. Korean workers, recruited mainly from farming villages, preferred the idea, propagated by Park, of themselves as 'an industrial warrior-citizen' to the notion of an industrial 'working class'. The state's dominant discourse of nationalism, familism, national security and developmentalism was hugely successful in rallying the masses behind the dictatorship.

The analysis by Nakano Toshio (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo) of the total war system in Japan had three main points. First, he argued that the total war system was a step towards the formation of a welfare state in Japan. Second, he focused on the colonial aspect, analysing the diverse ways in which the Japanese imperialist project involved calls for the mobilisation of the colonised peoples. Finally, he stressed the continuity of the wartime mobilisation system into postwar Japanese democracy. In this regard the postwar reorientation of Japanese society never meant

a total change. The round table discussion followed a presentation by Sakai Naoki of scenes from the film *The Deer Hunter*. Naoki aimed at demonstrating through film images how victimisers (American soldiers in Vietnam) turned themselves into victims. He drew a parallel between Japanese imperialist cinematography of 1930s and Hollywood's representation of the Vietnam War. Both displaced a sense of collective guilt and promoted a collective sense of victimisation. The subsequent discussion was focused on the question whether the term 'mass dictatorship' was appropriate to comprehend communist, fascist and developmental dictatorships. Its advantages and disadvantages in comparison with other terms such as 'totalitarian dictatorship' or 'modern dictatorship' were vigorously debated.

The conference showed that coercion and consent cannot be seen as polar opposites but should be understood as integral parts of dictatorship. Consent itself is a multi-layered experience spanning internalised coercion, forced consent, passive conformity and voluntary consensus. Ultimately the task awaiting the historians of dictatorship includes the deconstruction and pluralisation of terms such as 'consent' and 'consensus'. The project aims to contribute to this by exploring the theme of political religion and the other socio-cultural apparatuses of consensus in mass dictatorships at the 2004 autumn conference.