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Saddam as Hitler

Anti-Americanism has multiple dimensions. After examining the German data in chapter 1, in chapter 2 we explored several cultural and historical variants of anti-Americanism: first, an antimodern, predemocratic tradition; second, the legacy of communist ideology; and third, a contemporary, postdemocratic hostility to national sovereignty as such. Each version pushes anti-Americanism in a different direction. Chapter 3 looked at the tension between fantasy and reality in anti-Americanism, its ideological standing, and the role that anti-Americanism plays in the definition of an emerging identity for unified Europe. It is, however, obvious that current anti-Americanism has erupted in relation to the two Iraq wars. Although the various discourses of anti-Americanism refer to many issues, both political and cultural, it was clearly the confrontation between Washington and Baghdad that fueled the anger of the European street. Anti-Americans denounce the United States largely because it deposed Saddam Hussein.

The first Iraq war was fought to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. The second Iraq war was fought to end the Iraqi regime. Both wars, however, were fought in terms of a metaphor: Saddam as Hitler. As this chapter will show, the terms of

the metaphor shifted over time. At first the analogy had the narrow meaning of pointing out the unprovoked annexation of foreign territory: just as Hitler had invaded Czechoslovakia, Saddam had swallowed Kuwait, both transgressions against internationally recognized borders. Quickly, however, even during the first Iraq war, the metaphor came to signify the brutality of the Iraqi regime or, rather, the brutality of the Iraqi regime in its occupation of Kuwait. During the second Gulf war, the use of the metaphor became more emphatic: the brutality of the Iraqi regime to the Iraqi population itself and, especially, to ethnic minorities (e.g., the Kurds, the treatment of whom displayed a genocidal character). Moreover, the nature of the international threat posed by Iraq changed. Rather than being viewed as a local bully endangering its neighbors, Iraq came to be understood as the carrier of weapons of mass destruction, representing a much graver danger to countries much further away. On the one hand, the global threat associated with Iraq echoes the classical totalitarian aspiration to world domination; on the other, it is the function of a changed security perception after September 11.

The question of Iraq is central to the understanding of current anti-Americanism for two different reasons. As noted, the Iraq wars are the primary *casus belli* of the anti-Americans against the foreign policy of the United States. On a deeper level, however, the metaphor of Saddam as Hitler can lead us to a better understanding of what is at stake. For large parts of the American public, a war against totalitarianism remains just and worthwhile. For large parts of the public in Europe—the continent that incubated the two totalitarianisms that dominated the last century—a preference for appeasement prevails, and this difference turns into anti-Americanism.

However, the willingness to accommodate reprehensible

regimes is not only a European phenomenon, and clearly significant parts of the American public were opposed to the war. It is as if the judgment on totalitarianism had somehow softened since the collapse of Communism: not that one can find many defenders of the great dictators of the past but simply that the condemnation of Nazism and Communism no longer convincingly provides the orientation for the moral compass of many. So it is not surprising that George W. Bush's characterization of the Ba'ath regime as "evil" could be viewed as simplistic by a contemporary sensibility reluctant to distinguish between right and wrong, especially in Europe. It is not that anyone mounted much of a positive defense of Saddam Hussein's regime, but there was clearly reluctance to challenge it: Would it not be more comfortable just to ignore brutal regimes? Not everyone supported a war against Hitler, so it is not surprising to find an appeasement camp with regard to the metaphoric Hitler.

The Iraq wars posed the question of totalitarianism, both in terms of the metaphor of Saddam as Hitler and in terms of the real character of the regime, as will be discussed in this chapter. However, the wars also revealed the complex relationship of outsiders, so-called world opinion, to totalitarian regimes: though some witnesses can muster the resolve to confront evil, there is always a large appeasement camp with a strong desire to ignore, minimize, or even accommodate Hitler, Saddam, and their ilk. Therefore the historical question of totalitarianism is inextricably related to the contemporary question of moral judgment. Examining the metaphor of Saddam as Hitler allows us to reexamine the judgment on totalitarianism and thereby explore important inclinations in contemporary political culture. Germans born after 1945 sometimes asked their parents what they had done under the Nazi regime. Why had they failed to resist? History will eventually pose the same question to those

who would have preferred to protect Saddam's regime from change.

The German Lesson

Weimar Germany has long stood as the prime example of a democracy that failed and turned into the cradle of totalitarianism. This teleology from Weimar to Hitler anticipated the many failed democracies of the twentieth century, and it stands as a cautionary note for current and future democratization prospects. Today we continue to ponder Weimar culture to understand the vulnerability of democracy and the potential for totalitarian outcomes. Nazi Germany casts multiple shadows on the mass-murderous landscape of the twentieth century, and Weimar remains pertinent as long as mass destruction haunts the modern world.

Yet the paradigmatic significance of the failure of Weimar and the establishment of Nazi Germany is frequently obscured or distorted by certain misconceptions, which deserve interrogation. First, it is an illusion to believe that there is an intellectually viable strategy to identify this Nazi modernity as distinctively belonging to a "right," and therefore different from a "left," modernity in a substantive way that is more than merely about the externals of party affiliation. There were left and right strands within National Socialism itself, and in any case what made the regime so central to the twentieth century was its totalitarian and genocidal character, which exploded the left-right mold.

Second, it is equally misguided to approach the Nazi regime primarily as a cultural (and especially as an aesthetic-cultural) phenomenon, associated with the establishment of something reasonably described as cultural hegemony. This cultural

approach explicitly avoids politics as well as the degradation of politics into coercion and violence. Moreover the solely cultural approach to totalitarianism quickly runs into the temptations of cultural relativism, as if the Nazi worldview were just one possible choice among many, and therefore not subject to condemnation.

Finally, perhaps because of the growing distance from 1945, an underlying historicist tone has emerged that suggests that the Nazi era belongs to a completed past, a period in some once-upon-a-time epoch that has little to do with our contemporary condition. In this case, it would follow that the experience of that era has little pertinence to our thinking and institutions and that the totalitarian and mass-destructive potential played out in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s has no lessons for our contemporary predicament.

These three predispositions—accepting the conceptual viability and relevance of the left-right distinction, particularly regarding the emergence of the Nazi regime; the privileging of a cultural explanation and the attendant cultural relativism; and the historicizing distance indicating a diminished urgency to the question of totalitarianism—exemplify intellectual failings in the age of a relativist sensibility. To cut through some of these current misconceptions and recapture the standing of Hitler's Germany for political theory, it is productive to dwell on the current political metaphor, Saddam as Hitler, which can help us ferret out issues in the nexus of totalitarian regimes, political violence, and mass culture. Comparing Nazi Germany and Ba'athist Iraq, we can try to refocus the question of totalitarianism and its implication for political culture. In particular, this comparison can help clarify the three problems mentioned above and address certain lacunae in contemporary discussions of both regimes.

Regarding the left-right distinction: it makes little sense to claim that Nazi Germany was somehow of a “right” and that Stalinist Russia was then of a “left.” Perhaps this distinction holds in the nuances of their respective discourses, but the overwhelming feature of totalitarianism, the destructive power of the unlimited state—the diametrical opposite of any ethos of limited government—outweighs those distinctions in style, and in any case, that destructiveness was not the function of being “right” or “left.” As long as we pretend that National Socialism was of the right, then the parallel between the totalitarianisms of Hitler and Stalin is missed, and the history lesson of the twentieth century just becomes political bias. Saddam’s Iraq is a case in point for the obsolescence of the political designations of left and right; to paraphrase a familiar slogan, it was neither left nor right but just terrible. It derived directly both from Hitler and Stalin in specific intellectual, political, and symbolic terms. Like both, it involved a regime in which the personality of the leader was central and stood in a dialectical relationship to a manipulative ideology of the mass: in the totalitarian world, the call for “mass cultures” implied the empowerment of great dictators.

The case of Iraq also calls into question cultural approaches to the Nazi regime, which naturally ascribe a central analytic standing to “Nazi culture.” Was the contemporary credibility of the totalitarian regime genuinely a matter of a cultural consensus achieved through the successful dissemination of a plausible belief structure? Shall we really believe that the Nazi film and propaganda apparatus successfully convinced the German public that all was right with their world? No totalitarian regime has really been a cultural success in this sense. The alternative explanation, suggested by the case of Iraq, is the hypothesis of a “Republic of Fear,” to use exile dissident writer Kanan Makiya’s term: a regime in which violence, threats of violence,

and enforced complicity in violence are overwhelming and form the basis for the stability of the state. This is not a cultural normalcy but a reign of terror. Following this line of thought with regard to Nazi Germany, one can inquire into the character of the totalitarian state as a regime of terror and angst, rather than as a merely distinctive cultural style.

Finally, if Saddam was like Hitler (and obviously the point is not the assertion of absolute identity but a challenge to consider similarities), then to what extent is the outside world's response to Saddam like the earlier response to Hitler? It is here that the discussion of Saddam as Hitler overlaps with the question of anti-Americanism. The point is not only to consider the intentional political allegory—we fought Hitler therefore we must fight Saddam—but to remember how great the reluctance to fight Hitler was. That historical appeasement mentality can help us understand the contemporary reluctance to confront Saddam. The international response to Hitler did not, after all, start in Normandy. There were long years of denial and deferral. Observers inside Germany and abroad minimized Hitler's importance in Weimar, and even after the Nazi accession to power in 1933, there was extensive acceptance, appeasement, and tolerance. Calls for "regime change" were not common.

Most egregious of course was the deep resistance in "world opinion" to believing the accounts of mass murder. A feature of modern world opinion is precisely this preference to avoid facing violence, as well as the fascination with authoritarian leaders (consider the popularity of dictators such as Stalin, Castro, and Mao in what are otherwise Western democracies). The metaphor of Saddam and Hitler is therefore also an opportunity to think through the psychology of this response to totalitarian leaders and the states they command. Why is it easier to talk about instruments of violence, the weapons of mass destruction,

than to recognize victims of violence? For parts of the public, the presence of weapons of mass destruction was unquestionably more relevant than mass graves: a strange moral order, indeed.

Part of this dynamic has to do with the perverse consequence of a defining feature of enlightened modernity, tolerance, which is strangely taken to apply to criminal dictators too. Respect for the sovereignty of states—and their sovereigns—ranks well above any consideration of the well-being of citizens. Hence also cultural relativism, which quickly defends a reign of terror as just another way of life, for which we should show tolerance. The prewar political debate is a case in point, with the extensive resistance, even among otherwise human rights—oriented liberals, to discussions of regime change. This stance suggests the defense of sovereignty as such, no matter what the character of the regime, and therefore an inability to declare any regime unacceptable, which implies in turn the obligatory acceptance of any regime, no matter how bad. It follows that discussions of the domestic violence within another state are regarded with apprehension and mistrust, no matter how great the human suffering. Here the Saddam-as-Hitler metaphor takes another turn: the historical discounting of the reports of Nazi death camps represented the same mentality as the willingness to diminish the significance of Saddam's campaign against the Kurds. World opinion prefers to overlook genocide. Anti-Americanism results because the United States challenged this moral lethargy.

The Metaphor

In American political discourse, the metaphor of Saddam as Hitler dates from the period following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and referred at first solely to the phenomenon of inter-

national aggression. Thus George H. W. Bush said in his August 8, 1990, address announcing the deployment of U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia: "But if history teaches us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms. Appeasement does not work. As was the case in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors."¹ In the same vein, one week later, on August 15, Bush spoke at the Department of Defense: "A half a century ago our nation and the world paid dearly for appeasing an aggressor who should and could have been stopped."² It was not difficult for the press to take the next step, name the dictator of the 1930s, and develop an analogy between Saddam and Hitler; but for official discourse the matter involved only the fact of aggression and its corollary, the historical lesson on the importance of refraining from policies of appeasement.

Two months later, however, the presidential account of his adversary changed significantly. In place of the fact of Iraqi aggression, the focus shifted to the Iraqi leader, now associated with negative attributes extending beyond the war of aggression. Perhaps this heightened rhetoric can be attributed to the more sensational imagery used by the press, with which the president or his speech writers had to compete; alternatively, the rhetorical shift may reflect the fall election campaign and the political need to amplify public interest through more pronounced statements. Surely part of the change, however, must be explained realistically by the continuing brutality of the Iraqi occupation and the only gradual recognition of this violence by

1. George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia," August 8, 1990, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu>.

2. George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to Department of Defense Employees," August 15, 1990, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu>.

the outside world: it was no longer “just” a matter of the annexation of Kuwait by an occupying army but of a reign of terror as well, which then compounded the significance of the Hitler comparison. Thus in remarks at a fundraising luncheon for the gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams in Dallas on October 15, 1990, Bush asserted: “Hitler revisited. But remember, when Hitler’s war ended, there were the Nuremberg trials.” The evil of the adversary goes hand in hand with the expectation of a conclusive act of justice.

To substantiate the need for a trial, however, Bush went into detail at a Republican campaign rally in Manchester, New Hampshire, on October 23, 1990:

I am reading this great history of World War II. And I read the other night just about how Hitler, unchallenged—the U.S. locked in its isolation in those days, the late thirties—marched into Poland. Behind him—some of you will remember this—came the Death’s Head regiments of the SS. Their role was to go in and disassemble the country. Just as it happened in the past, the other day in Kuwait, two young kids were passing out leaflets in opposition. They were taken, their families made to watch, and they were shot to death—15- and 16-year-old. . . . We’re dealing with Hitler revisited, a totalitarianism and a brutality that is naked and unprecedented in modern times. And that must not stand.”³

Although the Hitler metaphor was used in an effort to galvanize public opinion, its development over a two-month period highlights the complex range of distinct issues at stake: aggression, appeasement, violence against civilians, totalitarianism, and, in particular, the personalization of the struggle with

3. George H. W. Bush, “Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Manchester, New Hampshire,” October 23, 1990, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu>.

an eye to war crimes trials. The latter point has to be seen not only as the rhetoric of the moment but as part of the tradition, perhaps distinctively American, of focusing on the personal responsibility of the adversary leader: Wilson's insistence on the Kaiser's culpability in the First World War, for example, as well as the criminalization of enemy leadership after the Second World War, both in Germany and in Japan.⁴ More complexly and critically, one can suggest that the focus on the person of Saddam, this individualization of history, derives from multiple sources: an individualist ethos that looks for someone to blame as well as a mass-cultural propensity to simplify complex matters in terms of individual celebrities—that is, Saddam as Hitler, both as stars. Still, the focus on the individual, Saddam, was not only a rhetorical effect, driven by the dynamic of political discourse; it has to be seen primarily as a description of the priority of the singular personality, the political leader, in the totalitarian state.

Before turning to the implications of this personalization process, it is worth noting precisely what did not show up in the public discourse, in the press, or in presidential addresses regarding the similarities between Saddam and Hitler: multifold real historical ties between National Socialism and the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, which had turned into Saddam's personal rule. An Iraqi-inflected pan-Arabism began to develop soon after the end of the British mandate in 1932 and became the target of Nazi foreign policy, given Germany's strategic aspirations in Central Asia: the Nazi youth leader Baldur von Schirach visited

4. Cf. Daniel Moran, "Restraints on Violence and the Reconstruction of International Order after 1945," in *War and Terror*, ed. Frank Trommler and Michael Geyer, Vol. 14 (Washington: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies Humanities Series, forthcoming).

Baghdad in 1937, and the Futuwaa, a youth league modeled on the Hitlerjugend, was soon established. Nazi Germany (with Italy and, of course, the Soviet Union of the Hitler-Stalin Pact era) supported the al-Rashid coup of 1941, including the “Farhud,” a pogrom against Baghdad’s large Jewish population.⁵ The coup was quickly suppressed, but it eventually became a mythic point of reference for the later-established Ba’ath Party, which celebrated the coup as “the first revolution for Arab liberation.”⁶

We know that a key Ba’athist ideologue, Michel Aflaq, expressed admiration for Hitler, as did Saddam, and the Ba’athist pursuit of power has elicited comparisons to Germany; thus Nicholas Natteau wrote; “The street tactics of the Ba’ath against the ICP [Iraqi Communist Party] or suspected ICP sympathizers resembled those of Hitler’s S.A. storm troopers during the street battles of the late 1920s in Weimar Germany.”⁷ This all suggests, however, that the Saddam-Hitler metaphor that emerged in response to the occupation of Kuwait in 1990 touched, if only accidentally, on a longer and more complex genealogical entwinement. The proximity of Saddam and Hitler implied by the metaphor is, therefore, not just an abstract comparison of distinct units but is grounded in the real history of Ba’ath ideology, Iraqi politics, and Saddam’s personal admiration for Hit-

5. Majid Khadduri, *Independent: A Study in Iraqi Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 172–73.

6. Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 151.

7. Nicholas Natteau, *Saddam over Iraq—How Much Longer? A Study of the Ba’athist Destruction of Iraqi Civil Society and the Prospects for Its Rebirth* (master’s thesis, Boston University, 1997), www.joric.com/Saddam/Saddam.htm.

ler as well as Stalin.⁸ It is not just a matter of comparing Saddam to Hitler for contemporary political reasons; there are also direct and multifaceted ideological connections.

The Leader

Where culture mobilizes the masses, they are probably following leaders. Totalitarian systems depend on the pairing of masses and leaders. Mass culture implies, in one variant or another, a cult of personality. Occasionally there are exceptions, when the utopias of free and leaderless masses circulate: for example, in the thought of Rosa Luxemburg, of the left-Communists whom Lenin famously denounced, or of some anarchists with their cult of spontaneity. But these utopian movements are typically contained and suppressed by more organizationally efficient institutions, and the masses are eventually subordinated to a party and a leader. Both in Germany and Iraq, the party overtook the people, and the leader came to eclipse the party.

The hypertrophic leader transforms the standing of the

8. "The lessons of 1963 had taught him that destroying civil society was not enough to ensure the IBP's [Iraqi Ba'th Party's] stay in power. Like Hitler, he now understood that this goal would require Ba'thizing not just the government, but the state, the military, and ultimately every nook and cranny of society. With this goal in mind, he was particularly attracted to the organizational methods used by Hitler to Nazify Germany. He understood that to ensure the party's complete domination over Iraq, society had to be regimented into the new Ba'thist order. According to one British journalist who visited Iraq in 1975, a government translator confided to him that Saddam Hussein's half-brother-in-law and head of intelligence, Barzan al-Tikriti, had asked him to procure books on Nazi Germany: 'He believed that Saddam himself was interested in this subject, not for any reason to do with racism or anti-semitism, . . . but as an example of the successful organization of an entire society by the state for the achievement of national goals.'" Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York, Toronto: The Free Press, 1991), 89. Cited by Natteau, *Saddam over Iraq*.

“mass,” a term that ceased to serve as a designation of the somehow really existing people and became instead a politically charged category used to dominate and control. Thus Aflaq’s 1979 celebration that “the role of the masses in the world has come of age”⁹ was not about authentic popular culture: it meant instead that the Iraqi population had been redefined as a compliant mass: the mass was represented by the party, and the party was Saddam. In particular, Aflaq’s assertion announced that the political adversary, the Iraqi Communist Party, had been definitively defeated and with it the category of class: the age of class struggle gave way to the age of the Arab mass. Yet Aflaq’s announcement also pointed to the criminalization of any dissident or otherwise nonconformist individuality, incompatible with the embracing and homogenizing category of mass. To be individual would mean betraying the masses. This outcome is consistent with the founding constitution of the Ba’ath party and its assertion that “all existing differences between the members of the nation are superficial and false, and will be dissipated within the anatomy of the Arab soul.”¹⁰ Individuality and difference were proscribed. Pan-Arabism, at least in the version Aflaq bequeathed to Iraqi Ba’athism, was not only about a transnational solidarity, vaguely comparable to pan-Germanism (subtly shifting politics away from citizenship in a nation-state to race, a pseudobiological category at odds with the notions of citizenship) but also about the submission of the individual to the mass. Pan-Arabism is ultimately one with the enforced collectivism of Nazism as well as the left-modernist fascination with liquidating individualism. Twentieth-century politicized mass culture, in its several inflections, on the Right and on the Left,

9. Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 243.

10. *Ibid.*, 197.

implies, tragically, a deep hostility to individual subjectivity and privacy. The echoes of this antisubjectivism reverberate through contemporary cultural theory (especially in the shadow of post-structuralism), which may explain the scholarly reluctance to address critically the illiberal regimes of totalitarian mass modernity.

The metaphor of Saddam and Hitler reappears however in a very different context, when Iraqi exile writer and dissident Kanan Makiya explores the character of Ba'athist politics by way of Hannah Arendt's study of totalitarianism, in particular with regard to the relationship of the masses to the leader in regimes of mendacity. Thus the Saddam-as-Hitler metaphor is not merely an artifact of George H. W. Bush's war rhetoric; it also serves the democratic Iraqi opposition in its efforts to make sense of the Ba'ath catastrophe. Makiya's interpretation of Iraq is refracted through Arendt's understanding of Nazi Germany. In both Nazi Germany and Saddam's Iraq, "truth" is whatever the leader says, no matter how absurd or implausible and, in fact, no matter how inconsistent or incompatible even with the leader's own earlier pronouncements. Thus Makiya, who is thinking about Iraq, cites Arendt, who is commenting on Hitler and Stalin: "The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that . . . one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness."¹¹

11. Ibid., 115.

Makiya's point involves the character of the loyalty that the masses bring to the regime. It is not a matter of a consensus (i.e., the shared belief of a convinced public). It is not that the public somehow accepts the propagandistic disinformation as representing a substantive truth about which it might develop an informed opinion. Nor does the public succumb to an imaginably effective cultural-industrial manipulation or some restructured hegemony. All of these cultural-theoretical models fail. Instead, Makiya claims that Iraqis largely recognize the falsehoods as false, which instead of eliciting outrage leads to cynicism and even admiration for the ability of the leader to change positions. Indeed it is not even a matter of treating the statements of the regime as true—the expectation of a truthful government is simply not a given—but only as performance, and it is through performance, always more powerful than truth or rules, that Saddam acts out his predominance: “. . . the Leader's omnipotence is acted out dramatically, as though performed on a stage. Favors are bestowed on people in such a way as to break the very rules the Leader's state enforces . . . ; his freedom to act, even to break his own rules, is intentionally pitted against everyone else's profound unfreedom. The effect, however, is not to highlight the latter, but to confound it with the former.”¹² In a context of universal falsehood, Iraqi society does not find sustenance in a successfully convincing propaganda apparatus, some “mass culture” that elicits support and authentic trust, but rather in the image of the great leader. Hero worship—that is, the worship of one hero—is central to the regime, which authorizes no room for disagreement or dissent. In other words, at stake is not an ideology of heroism that might be taken to call on all individuals to excel and to act heroically

12. *Ibid.*, 116.

but rather a constant entwinement of the abjection of each individual, facing constant admonitions to abjure all particularity, and the focus on the one leader who is the collectivized nation. Saddam was Iraq in the sense of the Nazi slogan *Deutschland ist Hitler*.

It is worth observing Makiya follow Arendt in one further step, as he highlights the freedom that was absent in Saddam's Iraq. Freedom—in the Ba'athist tradition—is only the freedom of the nation as a whole, (i.e., a sort of decolonization as collectivism, and this is then transferred onto the political leader). There is no claim of individual freedom. Yet, Makiya poignantly develops an alternative position: “The notion of freedom as a political condition that only exists because of the capacity of human beings to be different, to be in a minority, and not have to think the same deathly ‘free’ thoughts.” This version of freedom, he continues, “is absent in Iraqi society. When it arose in the modern era, it was snuffed out, first by the growing ideological hegemony of pan-Arabism and later by the social organization of the second Ba'athist regime [i.e., post-1968]. The absence not only of freedom but also of the very *idea* of this kind of freedom makes Saddam Husain's role-playing so effective.”¹³

Makiya's claim regarding the political freedom in the human condition translates Arendt's political theory into Iraq. The definition of freedom in terms of a human condition obviously stands at odds with current academic dogma regarding essentialism and humanism; eventually the political implications of this intellectual baggage may become clear. In the context of this chapter, however, and the examination of the cross-national metaphor, what resonates is the suggestion of an underdevel-

13. Ibid., 116. Makiya consistently spells the name of the Iraqi dictator in this manner.

oped liberal tradition—a standard piece of thinking about historical German political culture—but also a nostalgia for a lost opportunity. Makiya suggests that between the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy in 1932 and the seizure of power by the Ba'ath Party in 1968, liberalizing possibilities in Iraq did in fact exist. The Ba'ath, who suppressed that tradition of freedom, look back at the earlier era with disdain, celebrating only the Nazi-supported 1941 coup. This historical vision of the dictatorial party is analogous to the Nazi memory of the Wilhelmine era and the Weimar “system,” both vilified as too liberal and too free.

The Leader as Artist

Makiya's underscoring of Saddam's performance—his drama and his role-playing—points to the prominence of the leader as individual and as artist within the totalitarian system. Similarly, the German author Thomas Mann once drew attention to aspects of Hitler's performance and its proximity to aspects of the artist.¹⁴ Saddam and Hitler as artists? One might compare Hitler's early interest in painting with Saddam's strange obsession with architecture.¹⁵ Yet the point here is not the artistic production as such but rather the performance of the political leader as itself the act of art. The great leader of the masses stages himself as an artistic genius, precisely as part of his political presence. Facing the degraded masses, the leader stands out and above them as a unique individual, the creative genius: the artist. Saddam and Hitler both projected themselves

14. Thomas Mann, “Bruder Hitler” (1938), in *Essays*, Vol. 4, *Achtung, Europa! 1933–1938* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1995), 305–12.

15. Cf. Said K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 265–66.

to the public as absolute and overriding, as two examples can amply demonstrate.

While Hitler denigrates the conformist masses, whom he regards as susceptible to propaganda, he heroizes great individuals, to whom he attributes the artistic qualities of freedom and creativity. Everyone else conforms and obeys, but the totalitarian leader as artist can break all the rules (as in Makiya's description of Saddam) while he asserts his particular individuality against the world. Thus Hitler writes in Ralph Manheim's translation of *Mein Kampf*: "Personality cannot be replaced; especially when it embodies not the mechanical but the cultural and creative element. No more than a famous master can be replaced and another take over the completion of the half-finished painting he has left behind can the great poet and thinker, the great statesman and the great soldier, be replaced. For their activity lies always in the province of art. It is not mechanically trained, but inborn by God's grace."¹⁶ Different legacies compete within those lines: the opposition of the mechanical and the cultural, the cult of great masters, the priority of the aesthetic—all of these might be taken as aspects of the shattered cultural tradition of the educated middle class, the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Yet it is Hitler's insistence on irreplaceability, a resistance to exchange, that links his discourse to aspects of the aesthetic tradition: like the work of art and the artist, the politician too is absolutely original and fully unique. Where this claim becomes distinctively Hitler's, however, and where it stands absolutely at odds with Makiya's Arendtian appeal to difference in the human condition, is that—for Hitler—this uniqueness is the province of only a few, the great, the masters.

16. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 320.

The paragraphs that follow plunge, characteristically, into Hitler's antisemitism. The virtue of irreplaceability does not apply to everyone. Yet Hitler does not exclude Jews alone. On the contrary, he claims that most of humanity is barred from the realm of the unique. Being genuinely individual is not part of the general human condition. Uniqueness is, on the contrary, the exclusive privilege of the few. Meanwhile, the many, the perpetually replaceable masses, depend on a few leaders, who are alone distinct. Thus Hitler continues: "The greatest revolutionary changes and achievements of this earth, its greatest cultural accomplishments, the immortal deeds in the field of statesmanship, etc., are forever inseparably bound up with a name and are represented by it. To renounce doing homage to a great spirit means the loss of an immense strength which emanates from the names of all great men and women."¹⁷ Hence a vision in which the few great creators tower over the conformist mass and demonstrate their greatness through a distinctiveness that is—regardless of explicit field of activity—fundamentally artistic.

This priority of leadership in the context of mass society explains a characteristic aspect of *Mein Kampf*, the strange inter-persersion of autobiography in the political program. Individual personality—Hitler's memoir writing—pervades the political polemic throughout the book. Indeed this is the program announced in the preface to *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler states that the volume is intended not only to describe "the aims of our movement" and its development but also "to give an account of my own development."¹⁸ There is, however, a strange ambivalence about the project. Hitler concludes the preface, to be sure,

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., xlv.

with a monumentalizing gesture: “for a doctrine to be disseminated uniformly and coherently, its basic elements must be set down for all time. To this end I wish to contribute these two volumes as foundation stones in our common edifice.” Writing, he suggests, may guarantee eternal permanence and preclude interpretive variance, despite the dissemination of the message. Hence, the reassuring conclusion of the preface: he is putting his message in stone to guarantee its immutability. Yet this follows immediately on the unintentional expression of an underlying doubt about the book: “I know that men are won over less by the written than by the spoken word, that every great movement on this earth owes its growth to great orators and not to great writers.” Hitler the orator seems to doubt Hitler the writer. Or is it the pervasive suspicion of writing, literature, and the press that leads Hitler to this paean to orality? The heavy edifice he constructs in *Mein Kampf* recalls the Landsberg prison in which he wrote the book, but the closing of the preface also takes on an epitaphic character: a conclusiveness, an end, which would only be mitigated by live oration.

The preface to *Mein Kampf* sheds light on the cultural character of totalitarianism with its tension between writing and oration and between permanence and vitality. This conflict is symptomatic of the totalitarian condition: the leader is at the center of the movement, but the cumbersome apparatus of the movement (the party and its bureaucracy) may come to be at odds with the principle of leadership, which requires the possibility of constant redefinition. The need to write, in order to build an edifice, conflicts with the need never to be held to one’s word since truth is only contingent, whereas writing is permanent. Orality provides a flexibility that literacy, with its inherently critical potential, undermines through its durability. As creative artist, the leader can always say something new, with

little concern for consistency. It is this absolute elevation of the leader that is symptomatic.

Saddam Hussein imitated this elevation of the totalitarian leader that had been prefigured by Hitler and Stalin. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's autobiography intrudes into the political agenda. The Iraqi corollary, with a similar magnification of the leader, is the infamous Victory Arch in Baghdad. It is a grotesque monument, completed in August 1988 to celebrate the (dubious) victory over Iran, and unveiled in the midst of the genocidal *anfāl* campaign against the Kurds. Saddam designed the monument himself, intending it as an Iraqi competitor to the Parisian Arc de Triomphe, but Saddam is present in the monument in a way that goes far beyond his having envisioned it. Just as Hitler, the individual, protrudes into the Nazi program of *Mein Kampf*, so too does Saddam, the person, dominate the Iraqi national monument.

Makiya describes the monument as follows: Two steel forearms "come bursting out of the ground like bronze tree trunks and rise holding a sixty-six-foot-long sword in each fist. The two swords cross to form the apex of the arch at a point roughly 130 feet above the ground. Each forearm and fist, with the steel frame on which it is fixed, weighs 40 tons. Each sword, made of stainless steel, weighs 24 tons. This steel . . . was made by melting down the actual weapons of Iraqi 'martyrs.' War debris in the shape of 5,000 real Iranian helmets, taken from the battlefield, are gathered up in two nets (2,500 helmets per net). . . . To look at the helmets in the knowledge that their scratches, dents, and bullet holes are real, that human heads might well have exploded inside them, is . . . breathtaking."¹⁹ Indeed, it is

19. Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World* (New York: Norton, 1994), 209.

almost as breathtaking as the one defining characteristic of the monument, the bizarre fact that the two forearms are not sculpted objects but castings taken from plaster casts of Saddam's own arms and then enlarged. In 1991, still compelled to write under the pseudonym Samir al-Khalil, Makiya pondered this point: why a casting, which preserves all the imperfections, the scars, the veins, and the hair follicles of the forearms, rather than a sculpture that might have idealized the body parts? His answer: "Only casting renders absolute authority (which is singular and abstract, yet experienced in all the minutiae of daily life in Iraq) visible and corporeal, while retaining the aura of absolute uniqueness, so essential to the work of art even in this age of mechanical reproduction."²⁰

The projection of the leader's irreducible uniqueness into the artistic edifice, in homology to *Mein Kampf*, displays the absolute priority of personal power. It is not some idea or the spirit of the nation that pervades this war memorial. It is the unquestionable authority of the lord and master, the totalitarian leader. The masses are instrumentalized, literally—they are made identical with their instruments of violence—in the swords made from the weapons of the Iraqi soldiers, or they are degraded in the display of the Iranian helmets (degraded and desecrated: elsewhere Makiya reports how the corpses of the victims executed by Saddam's police were denied ritual cleaning, thus preventing their entry into paradise). The infinite narcissism of the leader means that nothing else counts, reality dwindles away, and the world can be annihilated. As different as these two entities are, *Mein Kampf* and the Victory Arch, both demonstrate the same imperious standing of the leader. In terms

20. Samir al-Khalil (Kanan Makiya), *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 6.

of political self-presentation, the metaphor—Saddam as Hitler—surely holds.

Culture and Violence

Saddam and Hitler: it is not difficult to ascribe to each a cultural penumbra, the writers, artists, and intellectuals who, sometimes bought, sometimes in voluntary delusion, pursued an affiliation with the totalitarian regime: Riefenstahl, Speer, Heidegger, Nolde, or the various Arab writers and Western architects who have benefited from Baghdad's largesse.²¹ In this context, one can cite as well the cultural programs of the regimes, the celebration of particular traditions or the symbol-laden construction projects: Saddam chose to rebuild Babylon. He would often stage himself as the heir to ancient civilizations, receiving the law from Hammurabi, using bricks, on each of which his name was imprinted: the intrusion of the leader into monumentality, as much an act of possession and naming as Hitler's placing himself in the center of *Mein Kampf*.²²

Did this sort of culture really matter? It remains an open question whether this cultural frenzy—writers' congresses, architectural competitions, museum exhibitions—played any significant role in generating support for the regime, as measured against the primary feature of life in the totalitarian state: fear of violence, including the moral degradation associated with complicity in violence. The contempt that the German author Ernst Jünger, referring to battlefield experience in the

21. *Cruelty and Silence* provides extensive discussion of how the Iraqi regime bought off Arab intellectuals to silence criticism and gain a public relations advantage.

22. Cf. Neil MacFaquhar, "Hussein's Babylon: A Beloved Atrocity," *New York Times*, August 19, 2003, A10.

First World War, could feel toward the aestheticizing world of bourgeois security can shed light on the tendency to treat the totalitarian regime as an aesthetic style. In Jünger's words: "Our blood is full of passions and feelings, that have no place at tea-time."²³ Or more explicitly anticultural: "This is not the time to read *Werther* with a tearful eye."²⁴ The existential reality of the battle stands at odds with the sentimentalism that Jünger associates with Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Werther*. War, so Jünger implies, has no space for culture.

It is a time of violence, not of art. This implies, however, that the culture of the totalitarian regime—if "culture" is the right word at all—is not primarily its aesthetic works but the ubiquity of violence and fear. In this view, the Nazi regime was defined less by its various propagandistic art exhibits than by its brutality and murder, public and private. This is surely true of Iraq. Despite the elaboration of a Ba'athist ideology, with influences from Sorel (through Aflaq) and Fichte (through Husri),²⁵ it is not the credibility of that confused amalgam of intellectual history that held Saddam's Iraq together but rather fear. Khidir Hamza, a key defector from the Iraqi nuclear program, writes of viewing a film of a "party denunciation meeting" in which the members of the party elite were forced to shoot each other.²⁶ Makiya similarly describes the double strategy of public and private violence: the public hanging of Jews accused of espionage in January 1969, at the outset of the regime, attended by thousands; and the private torture, that concluded with sealed

23. Ernst Jünger, "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis," in *Sämtliche Werke Essays I: Betrachtungen zur Zeit* 7.1 (Stuttgart: Klett Verlag, 1980), 95.

24. *Ibid.*, 39.

25. Cf. Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 152.

26. Khidir Hamza, *Saddam's Bombmaker: The Terrifying Story of the Iraqi Nuclear and Biological Weapons Agenda* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 112–15.

coffins to keep the bodies invisible. "Fear is the cement that holds together this strange body politic in Iraq," writes Makiya: not ideology, loyalty, or even tradition. "The public is atomized and broken up, which is why it can be made to believe anything." Mass society in the totalitarian world is, in effect, not a mass at all, but the ruins of the former civil society and communities. Makiya continues: "A society that used to revel in politics is not only subdued and silent, but profoundly transformed. Fear is the agency of that transformation; the kind of fear that comes not only from what the neighbors might say, but that makes people careful of what they say in front of their children. This fear has become a part of the psychological constitution of citizenship."²⁷

It is a terroristic society, and the description holds as much for Saddam's Iraq as it did for Hitler's Germany: cultures of fear, rather than art. Terror and the shame of complicity define individual lives. For example, for those Germans who viewed the boycott of Jewish stores in April 1933, enforced by Nazi paramilitary gangs, fear of facing similar threats and the shame of having stood by passively surely must have left traces that determined their subsequent relationship to the regime: a relationship of degradation and humiliation rather than of voluntary participation or ideological consensus. More important than the mobilized culture portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl's films, the Nazi reign of terror was defined by an immobilized conscience.

It is here that the German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger's February 1991 reflection on Saddam and Hitler ("Hitler's Successor: Saddam Hussein in the Context of German History") becomes pertinent. Enzensberger argues that in contrast to the standard dictators of the twentieth century, who were eager to

27. Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 275.

enrich themselves and therefore calculable, Hitler and Saddam represent something different, a desire for destruction as such. Plausible goals or a serious ideology are absent. Rather than personal gain or principled ideals, their ultimate goal is annihilation, a deep death wish, from which their own people, indeed the leader himself, is not excepted. In Iraq and Germany, this annihilationist leadership could succeed because of the widespread feelings of national humiliation—the defeat in the First World War, the legacy of colonialism—and these instincts were then available for manipulation by the unlimited will to death of the totalitarian political leader. Thus Enzensberger concludes: “The enemy of humanity can arm himself with the combined death energy of the masses, which gives him power bordering on genius: the infallible sense for unconscious stirrings in his followers. He does not operate with arguments but with emotions that unhinge any form of logic.”²⁸

Enzensberger’s account is at odds with Makiya’s, particularly with regard to the description of the population: in Makiya’s “republic of fear,” the bulk of the population is terrorized and terrified. In contrast, Enzensberger sketches a fanatic and fanatically loyal population. The distinction is significant, but in both models the center of social life is destruction: the threat of destruction directed by the state toward the population—as well as toward external enemies—or the self-destructive vengeance attributed to the population in pursuit of a death that it desires. The experience in postwar Iraq confirms both visions. There is evidence that the bulk of Iraqis appreciate the end of Saddam’s reign of terror, but there is also a hard core of

28. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Hitler’s Successor: Saddam Hussein in the Context of German History,” *Telos* 86 (Winter 1990–91), 156.

“dead-enders,” blindly loyal to the leader and indifferent to the prospect of continued hardship for the Iraqi people.

Was there a totalitarian “culture” that was more than the fear that terrorized and atomized individuals felt? Enzensberger at least suggests that there was a kind of mobilized culture in the totalitarian state, but it was a mobilization directed not toward an imaginable victory but only toward devastation. Nazi architecture, understood in this sense, should not be thought of as best exemplified by the massive megalomania of Albert Speer’s building plans but by the real-world leveling of European cities, the genuine goal of the Nazi imagination. In fact the same implies for the Allied destruction of German cities, an architecture of ruins, which, in Enzensberger’s account, was somehow not the result of the Nazi military failings but the very goal of the Nazis from the start. The Nazis pursued total war as they sang, “until everything falls to pieces.” Their goal was to transform the *Volk ohne Raum*—“people without space,” the title of a pro-Nazi novel advocating German colonialism—into pure *Raum ohne Volk*, space without people, where human life has come to an end. It was American and English bombs that leveled German cities, but that destruction was the result of a death wish deeply embedded in the Nazi imagination from the start. Saddam’s murders never numbered as high as the mass murder under Hitler or Stalin, but a similar process pertained: the program for mass destruction was directed against his own people as much as against external enemies.

Blissful Ignorance and Anti-Americanism

If the metaphor holds and Saddam is like Hitler, then how the world responded to Nazi Germany sheds light on how it has

responded to Iraq. Of course, the analogy is not perfect, and the historical circumstances were different, nonetheless there is one striking similarity. In neither case did the egregious violence of the totalitarian regime lead directly to unanimous protests and opposition. On the contrary, in both cases the serious military engagement—the war against Nazi Germany and the war against Saddam’s Iraq—took place only after extensive equivocation and denial. A desire to ignore violence prevailed, and that inclination grew stronger, the more terrible the violence. As far as Iraq is concerned, the question of compliance with U.N. disarmament mandates was long given pride of place and was split—in the interest of respecting state sovereignty, no matter how miserable the character of the state—from questions of the treatment of the domestic population, about which a grotesque and chilling silence prevailed. Even after the war, the mass graves simply count less than a determination about the weapons of mass destruction. We would rather not hear. The secret of domestic violence, in Iraq or elsewhere, is not easily addressed; indeed it is preferably ignored.

While the initial German lesson cited by George H. W. Bush in 1990 was the admonition against appeasing an international aggressor, there is surely another lesson as well: the urgency to refuse to accept the world’s predisposition to remain impervious to genocide and terror. What is the iron law that makes world opinion—the editorial pages of leading newspapers, the U.N. committees, and the experts of the public sphere—so predisposed to ignore the news of violence, and are we condemned to obey this law? Surely the victims of violence want their story to be heard. For example, Makiya concludes an interview with Taimour, a young Kurd who, as a twelve-year-old, witnessed the mass destruction of his village and the killing of his family:

“If you could choose, what would you want to do in your life now?

I don't know for myself.

Is there something you want out of life very much?”

Yes.

What?

To be a known person.

A known person?

Yes.

Known for what?

The *Anfal*.

Do you want to be known more for the *Anfal* or for being a *peshmerga*?

For *Anfal*.

What do you mean ‘known for *Anfal*’?

I want the world to know what happened to me.”²⁹

The problem is, however, that much of the world does not want to know. The desire to be untroubled by other's suffering is often greater than the sense of human compassion. The similarity of Nazi Germany and Saddam's Iraq is confirmed by the comparable avoidance strategies that outsiders employed in order to ignore. The severe violence of the totalitarian regime elicits nothing more readily than silence among the well-meaning carriers of world opinion: mass murder often provokes less protest than a trivial scandal in a run-of-the-mill city hall. As Enzensberger put it, “Then, as now, the world did not want to come to terms with what it confronted. Foreign governments regarded Hitler as a statesman representing ‘legitimate concerns,’ whom one had to accommodate, with whom one had to negotiate. The winners of WWI welcomed him as an ‘agent of stability,’ as a trading partner, as a counterweight to the Soviet

29. Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence*, 199.

threat; in other words, one dealt with him on a normal political level and trusted that it was a matter of solving conflicts of interest.”³⁰

The flight into normalcy was not merely a matter of self-interest but also, indeed above all, a denial of the horror, a refusal to hear the news of the death camps, just as today Saddam’s genocide is not given serious consideration, especially by opponents of the war. This is as true in the Arab world as in the democratic West: the man responsible for killing the most Muslims in history does not face much retrospective criticism among Arab leaders. Thus Mohamad Jasem al-Sager, the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Kuwaiti People’s Council, commented bitterly on Arab parliamentarians’ silence regarding the evidence of mass killings under Saddam: “Is it possible that the representatives of the Arab nations refuse to abide by even the most basic duties of their profession—representing their people? Is it possible that they fail to utter a single word of sympathy for the thousands of victims of the Arab dictator? . . . Arab parliamentarians limit their condemnation to the Zionists and the foreign invasion and have purposefully forgotten the crimes committed under our noses. Would these Arab parliamentarians dare to hold the gaze of an Iraqi woman sitting at the grave of her murdered children? We have seen thousands of people gathering the remains of their relatives in plastic bags.”³¹

Perhaps Arab parliamentarians have ideological grounds to avoid criticizing another Arab leader: a misguided ideology to be sure. Yet there was hardly a comparable rationale in the West for politicians and demonstrators to come to the defense of the

30. Enzensberger, “Hitler’s Successor,” 157.

31. MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series*, no. 533, July 2, 2003, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP53303>.

Iraqi regime—except the cowardly rationale of avoiding addressing the violence. In the end, it was left to the United States to respond to the fact of Saddam’s genocide. George W. Bush called it “evil” and scandalized those segments of the cultural-relativist public who would have preferred to ignore it. Anti-Americanism derives from many sources, as we have seen in the previous chapters, but among these sources one figures quite large: the high moral standard that the United States has set, in the Iraq war and in fact since the Nuremberg Trials, with regard to Nazi Germany. Whether the United States has always lived up to these principles is another matter, but historical failings never disprove the validity of ideals. The United States has played an indispensable role in the wars against totalitarian violence and has thereby raised moral standards in world affairs. The United States has disrupted the blissful ignorance of a world opinion prepared to ignore suffering. Resentment results. Anti-Americanism is the expression of a desire to avoid the moral order and to withhold compassion from the victims of violence.