

# The Human Condition and the Totalitarian Experience

Dr. Thomas Werneke

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<b>Time Slot:</b>	Thursdays, 1:30 p.m.
<b>Language of Instruction:</b>	English
<b>Contact Hours:</b>	45
<b>ECTS Credits:</b>	6

## Course Description

The course focuses on the classical concept of the totalitarian state developed by Hannah Arendt and others, which takes Hitler and Stalin as the primary models for this uniquely 20th century political system. We will be covering some of the subsequent modifications in the theory of totalitarianism, insights gained from the close examination of historical changes and developments, especially in the former Soviet Empire. Here are some of the questions we will be dealing with: what are the key elements of totalitarianism? What are the fundamental elements of totalitarian rule? What were the official positions and the popular attitudes toward the rulers and such totalitarian atrocities as the Holocaust and the mass imprisonment? What insights into the totalitarian system and mindset can be gained from psychology and psychoanalysis? Under what psychological/social conditions are individuals capable of offering opposition or resistance, as did the German resistance and the “rescuers” of Jews under Nazi domination or dissidents in the Soviet Union?

While the manifestations of totalitarianism may now appear to be bygone of merely historical interest, the social psychology of “totalitarian situations” remains acutely important, even in present-day democratic societies. The massacre at My Lai, the obedience experiments carried out by Stanley Milgram, similar events and similar studies, provide evidence of how easily average citizens – and by no means only the “authoritarian personalities” as described by Theodor W. Adorno and Erich Fromm – have the potential of behaving inhumanely in specific situations, when unthinking submission, even to the most questionable orders, seems to be the easiest way to deal with the stress and insecurity of the moment.

What follows are the class schedule and the reading assignments for the eleven class sessions. Please be sure to have worked through the readings carefully prior to each session. All the texts identified below are included on our digital learning platform Blackboard. In addition to these readings, there are two pocket books to be read and analysed in a research paper, namely Arthur Koestler’s, *Darkness at Noon*, London: Vintage 2005 (first published in 1940), and Aldous Huxley’s, *Brave New World*, New York: HarperCollins 1998 (first published in 1932).

## Learning Objectives

- Introducing the history of National Socialism (including the Holocaust) and Stalinism (including the Great Purge) as well as other violent events in modern history
- Studying different approaches that try to explain the individual, collective, and societal premises of the Holocaust and other genocidal case studies
- Training to form and express arguments during (scholarly) debates in class, and to articulate complex thoughts during an in-class presentation
- Training how to read, capture, and employ theoretical approaches in the field of the humanities
- Improving essay-writing skills in the field of the humanities

## Student Profile

Should be in their fourth semester of college/university education or beyond.

## Assignments and Grading

Attendance and participation (includes Independent Project report and an in-class presentation): 200 Points

Weekly written summaries of readings: 200 Points

Midterm Exam: 250 Points

Term Paper: 350 Points

Completion of the Midterm Exam as well as the Term Paper is needed for a grade.

FUB Grade	Points of 1,000
1.0	980-1,000
1.3	950-979
1.7	900-949
2.0	850-899
2.3	800-849
2.7	750-799
3.0	700-749
3.3	650-699
3.7	600-649
4.0	500-599
5.0	< 500

## Attendance

Attendance in class is **mandatory**. We also expect you to be **punctual** out of respect to both your instructor and your fellow students. An absence for more than half of a particular day's session will be considered an absence for that day.

If you cannot attend class because you are ill, please **notify your instructor** by e-mail (not via messenger service or through another student) before class. Any absence **without a notification** of your instructor before class will automatically be considered **unexcused**.

Absences because of **illness** are **excused**; however, for the **third** sick day and every other sick day after that (per course), you will need to turn in a **doctor's notice** ("Attest" in German) in order for them to count as excused, too. It is **your** responsibility to keep track of your absences and to know when a doctor's note is required. No doctor's notice issued more than three days after the day of illness will be accepted.

If you miss an **exam** due to an excused absence, your instructor and the FU-BEST team will arrange a make-up exam for you; you may also be entitled to a term paper **deadline extension**. If you, however, do not fulfill all course requirements needed for a grade by the (later) date determined by the program, passing the course is no longer possible.

Please also note that if you miss **more than half** of a course's sessions (even if due to excused absence), passing the course is no longer possible.

Personal travel and visits by relatives or friends are **not** accepted as reasons for absence (i.e., absences for these reasons always count as **unexcused**).

Regarding **unexcused** absences, please note the following:

- Any unexcused absence has consequences for at least the participation portion of the grade.
- Two unexcused absences lead to a lowering of the course grade by a fraction.
- Three unexcused absences will result in a 5.0 (equivalent to an "F") on the transcript.

## Literature

Digitalized readings posted on FU platform Blackboard.

Arthur Koestler: Darkness at Noon

Aldous Huxley: Brave New World

## Moderation

Each session will commence with a discussion on the assigned reading, a discussion led by a student. Each member of the class will be required to make one presentation during the course. It should be no longer than 10 minutes. Everyone will be familiar with the assigned reading so the presenter does not need to go into many details. The focus should instead be on the main theses of the text (and, in the case of empirical studies, on their methodology). The trick is condensing the text without missing the essentials. The presentation should conclude with a few critical comments. For example, how convincing is the author? What are the strengths, the weaknesses, of the text? This is the first part of the presentation.

The second part will be a class discussion guided by the presenter as chair-person. He or she shall prepare at least two or three questions for our class discussion. The student leading each of the class discussions will prepare a handout of no more than two pages for the class, to be e-mailed to me ([werneke@zzf-potsdam.de](mailto:werneke@zzf-potsdam.de)) as a WORD document no later than Monday afternoon, 5 p.m. The handout should include the main points of your presentation (indicating page numbers of the text) and your questions for the class discussion. I will bring copies on Wednesday for each member of the class.

More than a mere formality, your oral presentation should be an exercise in public speaking and not merely a reading of your handout or notes. Please address us while standing, talk to us while looking at us most of the time rather than at your handout. Use only a few notes for reference (during the second part, when serving as a chair-person, you will of course be seated). The criteria for grading your presentation shall include:

- How well did the speaker summarize and condense the central points of the text?
- How thorough were the preparations?
- Did he or she offer interesting and thought provoking themes for a critical class discussion?
- Did he or she address the audience, engaging the other members of the class in the discussion and analysis?

## Term-Paper

Please write a well-organized and thought-out paper covering for example research questions, as the following:

1. What is the meaning of the concept of “totalitarianism?” What is the classic, ideal type? What critical objections might be raised to this concept and how would you modify it in order to make it more useful for the analysis of past or present political systems?
2. Write an analysis of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* based on the “absolute” picture of a full-fledged totalitarian regime. Describe the historical background to Koestler’s novel, namely the main characteristics of the Stalinist regime and the purge trials. Please do not simply apply the abstract features of Hannah Arendt’s analysis, for example; rather, illustrate and enhance it by including specific events from the history of the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s. Identify the relationships between the details of the novel and the psychological features of a fully developed totalitarian system.
3. Compare the totalitarianism elements of rule in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s with that of Hitler’s Germany between the mid-1930s and the end of World War II. Be as specific as possible (i.e., familiarize yourself with concrete historical structures and events in Nazi Germany) What are the similarities? The differences? What might account for these?
4. Is the social system in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* also a form of totalitarianism? What tendencies or characteristics of the ‘free world’ of his time and ours are present in this ‘brave new world’? Are the dangers he perceived, though perhaps exaggerated, convincing and real? Which tendencies do you think we should be challenging and opposing in today’s ‘free world’ in order to counter the perceived dangers?

The term-paper shall be ca. 10 pages (double spaced), in no case fewer than 15,000 characters (including empty spaces) nor more than 25,000. Please cite all direct quotes and references, the sources you rely upon, in footnotes (not in parentheses in the text). Please do not rest content, in your presentation of Koestler and Huxley, with a mere summary (readily available on the Internet); rather make your points with specific citations from the books. Include a bibliography, a cover sheet and a conclusion. Don’t forget the page numbers!

I require from you a digital version by mail.

## Independent study report – an outside-the-classroom-project

Each student is expected to visit one of the following museums/memorial sites in Berlin that are relevant to the topic of this class.

These include, among others:

German History Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum),  
Unter den Linden 2

Memorial Site for German Resistance (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand),  
Stauffenbergstraße 13-14

Topography of Terror (Topographie des Terrors)  
Niederkirchner Straße 8

Documentation Site for Nazi Forced Labor (Dokumentationszentrum NS-  
Zwangsarbeit Berlin-Schöneeweide)  
Britzer Straße 5

Remembrance and Memorial Site Ravensbrück (Mahn- und Gedenkstätte  
Ravensbrück)  
Straße der Nationen  
16798 Fürstenberg/Havel

Memorial Site for the Berlin Wall (Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer)  
Bernauer Straße 119

Stasi Museum (Gedenkstätte Normannenstraße)  
Ruschestraße 103, Haus 22

Visiting one of these sites, please identify those aspects that relate to the substance of this class, either on the general nature of totalitarianism or specific elements of its implementation, its character, the nature of its rule. Identify and discuss these in a short (circa 4 pages) summary / analysis. Check the website of these sites (each offers an English translation) for further information, such as a brief history, significance, additional readings, as well as location and opening times. Try to put it into the bigger context of its history and our course's theme.

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Course Schedule

Calendar	Topics, Readings, etc.
Session 1	<p><b>Topic: Introduction to the course; overview of the concept of Totalitarianism.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiro, Herbert, "Totalitarianism," in: International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ed. David L. Sills, London 1968, vol. 16, pp. 106-113.</li> </ul>
Session 2	<p><b>Topic: The concept of Totalitarianism and its limits of explanation</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baberowski, Joerg, Doering-Manteuffel, Anselm: The Quest for Order and the Pursuit of Terror: National Socialist Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union as Multiethnic Empires, in: Geyer/Fritzpatrick 2009, pp. 180-230.</li> <li>• Bauman, Zygmunt: Modernity and Ambivalence, Ithaca/NY 1991, pp. 1-52.</li> </ul>
Session 3	<p><b>Topic: The Mind of Perpetrators and Popular Attitudes towards Atrocities in Totalitarian Society.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, London 1965, pp. 21-35, 135-150.</li> <li>• Ian Kershaw, "German Popular Opinion and the 'Jewish Question', 1939-1945: Some further Reflections," in: Arnold Paucker (ed.), The Jews in Nazi Germany 1933–1945, Tübingen 1986, pp. 365-386.</li> </ul>
Session 4	<p><b>Topic: Individual Resistance to the Holocaust: The Rescuers.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Michael Berenbaum / Abraham J. Peck (ed.), The Holocaust and History. The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined, Bloomington / Indianapolis 1998, Introduction to Part 10 „The Rescuers“, pp. 649-650.</li> <li>• Nechama Tec, „Reflections on Rescuers“, in: Berenbaum / Peck, op. cit., pp. 651-662.</li> <li>• Eva Fogelman, "The Rescuer Self", op. cit., pp. 663-677.</li> <li>• Samuel P. Oliner, „Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. A Portrait of Moral Courage,“ op. cit., pp. 678-690.</li> </ul>
Session 5	<p><b>Topic: The Rescuers (continued).</b></p> <p><b><i>Independent Project report to be submitted</i></b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beate Kosmala, "Facing Deportation in Germany, 1941-1945: Jewish and Non-Jewish Responses," in: Beate Kosmala / Feliks Tych (ed.), Facing the Nazi Genocide: Jews and Non-Jews in Europe, Berlin 2004.</li> <li>• Inge Deutschkron, We survived. Berlin Jews Underground, German Resistance Memorial 2008.</li> </ul> <p><b>Discussion:</b> Huxley's "Brave New World"</p>
Session 6	<p><b>MIDTERM EXAM</b></p>

<p><b>Session 7</b></p>	<p><b>Topic: The Classical Concept of the “Authoritarian Personality”.</b></p> <p><i>(Tentative) literature list/bibliography for Term Paper to be submitted</i></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, <i>The Authoritarian Personality</i>, New York / Evanston / London 1950, pp. IX-XII, 1-17, 255-257, 971-976.</li> <li>• Detlef Oesterreich, “Flight into Security,” (paper) Berlin 1998.</li> </ul> <p><b>Discussion:</b> Koestler`s “Darkness at noon”</p>
<p><b>Session 8/9</b></p>	<p><b>Double Session: Exhibition / Field Trip</b></p>
<p><b>Session 10</b></p>	<p><b>Topic: Totalitarian Situations in Free Societies: The My Lai Experience.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seymour M. Hersh, <i>My Lai 4. A Report on the Massacre and its Aftermath</i>, New York 1970, pp. XI-XII, 3-89.</li> <li>• Edward M. Opton, „It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It”, in: N. Sanford and C. Cromston, <i>Sanctions for Evil</i>, San Francisco 1971, pp. 49-70.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 11</b></p>	<p><b>Topic: Totalitarian Situations: The Milgram Experiment.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stanley Milgram, <i>Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View</i>, New York 1974, pp. 1-31, 165-168, 179-189.</li> <li>• Goffman, Erving: <i>Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity</i>, London 1963, pp. 4-36.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Term Paper to be submitted!</i></b></p>
<p><b>Session 12</b></p>	<p><b>Topic: Psychoanalysis as an Antidote against Totalitarianism? Psychological Roots of Submission.</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bruno Bettelheim, <i>The Informed Heart. Autonomy in a Mass Age</i>, Glencoe 1963, pp. 3-41.</li> <li>• Timothy Snyder, <i>On Tyranny</i>, New York 2017.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 13</b></p>	<p><b>Topic: Individual Freedom and the Longing for Submission. Enlightenment as an Antidote against Totalitarianism?</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, <i>How Democracies Die</i>, New York 2018, p. 32-82. (Chapters "Gatekeeping in America"; "The Great Republican Abdication"; "Subverting Democracy").</li> <li>• Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, in: Peter Gay (ed.), <i>Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West</i>, New York 1954, I, pp. 1071-76 (reproduced in: Peter Gay, ed., <i>The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology</i>, 1973, pp. 383-3900).</li> </ul>