

Review of: "Carl Friedrich's Path to "Totalitarianism""

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This is a tightly focused and clearly argued essay that examines Carl Friedrich's definition of totalitarianism, his minor adaptations, and how it relates to a small but crucial group of intellectuals who were themselves wrestling with how to define totalitarianism, albeit often for different purposes. The clarity with which he traces Friedrich's thinking is welcome. The author provides sufficient context for Friedrich's intellectual ideas and definitions, and the intellectual milieu from which Friedrich and his ideas emerged, specifically his ideas on German state theory, his training with Alfred Weber, and his discomfort with some of Max Weber's ideas. His presentation of Friedrich's definition of totalitarianism and why and how he disagrees with the concepts of garrison states and autocracy is brief, but well and clearly done.

The core of the essay centers on the 1953 conference at Harvard that Turner describes as part of "Harvard's efforts to provide an academic basis for Cold War policy." Many of those who attended became Cold War policymakers and the theoreticians who provided the intellectual credentials for those policies, although linking those ideas and policies is not Turner's focus. He wisely keeps his focus on Friedrich's intellectual evolution and his disagreements with fellow theoreticians. Given that Hannah Arendt's ideas on totalitarianism remain very influential, focusing on Friedrich and his sparring matches with Lasswell is welcome.

But lest there be any doubt, this essay keeps its focus on intellectual history and debate. As a political and social historian, what I find intriguing about the Harvard conference and its participants is the extent to which those participants sought to construct concepts and definitions that, in essence, focused on post-WWII socialist states. For example, Friedrich offers five features of totalitarian states. He writes of a "discretionary state," where, unlike totalitarian states, the "bureaucrats were responsible," and implicitly well or sufficiently educated. His reference point here is pre-WWI and pre-Nazi Germany. But those attending the Harvard conference sought to define new states that they viewed as post-WWII rivals and enemies. For many of them, it was not a mere intellectual exercise. But in the case of the USSR and People's Republic of China, Friedrich's ideas of a "discretionary state," where "bureaucrats were responsible" were not part of those states' history. While Friedrich writes of a key distinction between the totalitarian states and those one might label "democratic" as due to "the character of the new elite," what constitutes "character" is left unspoken. Many who led and staffed the new socialist bureaucracies were poorly educated, inexperienced in administrative affairs, and had been previously barred from such posts. And each state came to power after overcoming foreign interventions and civil war. The sense of fear of external and domestic threats loomed large and helps to explain the powers given to the various security services (terror being a definitive attribute in Friedrich's definition of totalitarianism into the 1960s) and the construction of a one-party state to restore and develop their economies. Ideology for supporters of these new one-party

states was not “irrational” but rather a means to understand the past and the future. That an implicit lack of historical perspective and these issues were not the focus of some parts of the Harvard conference is telling. For folks like me, the omissions beg for attention.

I am not suggesting that Turner’s essay suffers as a result of these omissions. This is hardly a case of criticizing an engaging essay for what it does not discuss. On the contrary, he does a fine job of keeping his focus on Friedrich and his intellectual competitors. But if he wishes to use the Harvard conference to expand his explorations into the development of the concept of totalitarianism and how it came to become part the political DNA of postwar U.S. politics, that conference will provide obvious springboard.