Established writers whose reputation is affixed to a particular line of argument are typically ill disposed to change their minds in public. Some authors sincerely believe that the historical record vindicates them. Others are determined that the historical record will vindicate them. Still others ignore the historical record. Among students of totalitarianism, no one had more at stake reputationally than Hannah Arendt. It is not just that The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) established her as the premier thinker on its topic. It is also that totalitarianism, as she understood it, ribbons through all of her subsequent books, from the discussion of “the social” in The Human Condition (1958) to the analysis of thinking in the posthumously published The Life of the Mind (1978). How ready was she to adapt or to change entirely arguments she had first formulated as early as the mid-to-late 1940s? “Stalinism in Retrospect,” her contribution to Columbia University’s Seminar on Communism series, offers a rare opportunity to answer, at least partially, this question.

Arendt’s foil was the publication of recent books on Stalin and the Stalin era by three Russian witnesses: Nadezhda Mandelstam, Roy Medvedev, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. According to Arendt, the books meshed with her own theoretical conception of Bolshevism while changing the “whole taste” of the period: they contained new insights into the nature of totalitarian criminality and evil. “Stalinism in Retrospect” documents Arendt’s arguments and challenges to them by a number of the seminar’s participants. Of particular note is the exchange between her and Zbigniew Brzezinski, an expert on the Soviet Union, a major interpreter of totalitarianism in his own right, and soon to be President Carter’s National Security Advisor (January 1977–January 1981). Notes by the editor, Peter Baehr, offer a critical context for understanding Arendt’s argument.

Keywords: criminality, evil, Stalin, Stalinism, subjective factor, totalitarianism

INTRODUCTION

In June 1966, almost seven years before she spoke on “Stalinism in Retrospect” at Columbia University, Hannah Arendt drafted a preface to Part III (Totalitarianism) of the third edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism.1 There she paused to consider a question that echoes in the Columbia seminar room: to what extent does scholarship on totalitarianism subsequent to the appearance of Origins

require an updating or transformation of its core arguments? Stalin died in 1953 and, for a while, it seemed that the post-Stalin transition was continuing in the totalitarian mold. But by 1966 Arendt was confident that, following Khrushchev’s departure, the Soviet Union had reverted to its earlier incarnation: a one-party dictatorship. Totalitarianism in Russia, it transpired, had not outlived its leader. Even so, the gap between late 1949 (when the book had been delivered to the publishers) and 1953–54 required attention. Obligingly, Part III of the 1967 edition of Origins was amended; many small new interpolations bring the story up to date. They do not change the story. Arendt was emphatic that no later study or document offered any ground whatsoever to doubt the fundamental cogency of her analysis. Khrushchev’s speech at the Twentieth Party Congress could shock only convinced adherents of Communism. To students of totalitarianism, its “revelations” about Stalin’s suspiciousness, his admiration for Hitler, and the atrocities that Stalin orchestrated simply confirmed what had long been known or guessed at.

Similarly, the so-called Smolensk Archive materials, interpreted by Merle Fainsod, are consistent with established totalitarianism theory. For Arendt, their greatest interest lay in what they exposed about struggles within the Bolshevik party during the 1920s, before Stalin’s supreme triumph: before, in other words, Soviet totalitarianism had been initiated. Once it had, “the Smolensk archive tends to confirm what we knew before from less irrefutable sources” (xxxii): the regime’s contemptuousness toward facts that contradicted its fictions; the duplicative competiveness of its organs; the dominion of police power over the party; the hunt for objective enemies—“criminals without a crime”—and their liquidation; and the stark totalitarian inversion of Western morality so that “Thou shalt bear false witness” became a new article of faith (xxxiii); the chaotic impact of the Great Purge on the economy and society. The historian Robert Tucker, declares Arendt, plainly simplifies her view of Soviet destructiveness when he says that the Great Purge of the 1930s was irrational and inimical to the war effort. That it was a “great wrecking operation” is certainly true. Also true, however, is that constant destruction and permanent instability is integral to totalitarian formations; without it, she claimed, Stalin’s government would have


4. A typo on p. xxxiv has “Richard” Tucker. For his comments on Origins, see The Great Purge Trial, ed., with notes, by Robert C. Tucker and Stephen F. Cohen, with an Introduction by Robert C. Tucker (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publishers, 1965), xxvii. Tucker’s redescription of Arendt’s view makes her sound like a sociological structural functionalist: the instability produced by the purge cycle “is treated as a functional requisite of totalitarianism as a system” (ibid.). The language of social science must have grated on the sociologically neuraglic Arendt, even as she mockingly repeats it: “Instability is indeed a functional requisite of total domination, which is based on an ideological fiction and presupposes that a movement, as distinguished from a party, has seized power. The hallmark of this system is that substantial power, the material strength and well-being of the country, is constantly sacrificed to the power of organization, just as all factual truths are sacrificed to the demands of ideological consistency” (Origins, xxxiv).
veered off into a more limited one-party state, its apparatuses becoming ever more routinized as the movement succumbed to the state.

And just as archival materials and public-secret speeches furnish nothing essentially novel for theorists of totalitarianism to engage, neither, Arendt averred, do modern biographies of totalitarian rulers.

Konrad Heiden’s biography of Hitler and Boris Souvarine’s biography of Stalin, both written and published in the thirties, are in some respects more accurate and in an almost all respects more relevant that the standard biographies by Alan Bullock and Isaac Deutscher respectively. This may have many reasons, but one of them certainly is the simple fact that documentary material in both cases has tended to confirm and to add to what had been known all along from prominent defectors and other eye-witnesses. (xxix)

The only substantial modification that Origins required owed nothing to a change in the factual landscape or to actual events since 1949. It needed, instead, a more rigorous theoretical culmination than its 1951 predecessor had provided (xxiv). Arendt supplied the deficiency with a new chapter called “Ideology and Terror.” First published in 1953 as an article in the Review of Politics, then added to the second (1958) and third (1967) editions of Origins, it was the only major, durable addition Arendt deemed necessary for her masterpiece.5

The Columbia seminar, recorded below, builds on that attitude of confident self-vindication. It was her last public statement on Stalin and Stalinism. The recently published books by Nadezhda Mandelstam, Roy Medvedev, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn on the Stalin era change the “whole taste” of the period, says Arendt, but require no theoretical reconsideration of it. Even so, students of Arendt will be struck by some changes of emphasis in her account (for instance, criminality is elevated to a “principle” of Bolshevism as distinct from just one of its more conspicuous features) and by some oddities in her discussion of evil (“banality” is notable for its absence). More generally, the Columbia seminar discloses the pains Arendt took to defend her theory from critics even where newly disclosed facts about the survival of plurality under totalitarian conditions challenged it.

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5. The Preface to Part III of Origins is notable for its analysis of Khrushchev’s speech to the Twentieth Party Congress; its remarks on the transition, following Stalin’s death, of the Soviet Union to a one-party dictatorship; and its attempt to determine if and to what extent Communist China was totalitarian, on which see Peter Baehr, “China the Anomaly: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Maoist Regime,” European Journal of Political Theory 9, no. 3 (2010), 267-286.
UNIVERSITY SEMINAR ON COMMUNISM
April 26, 1972: Professor Hannah Arendt (New School of Social Research)
“Stalinism in Retrospect”

Members Present: Byung-joon Ahn, Joseph Maier, Seweryn Bialer, William E. Odom, Paul Borsuk, Grant Pendill, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jaan Pennar, Lenard Cohen, Alexander Rudzinski, Bogdan Denitch, Jane Shapiro, Felice Gaer, Sophia Sluzar, Charles Gati, David Wilson, Ki-shik Han, Alexei Yakushev, Russell Hardin, Sharon Zukin, Janos Horvath, Peter Ludz

Professor Hannah Arendt led the University Seminar on Communism in a discussion of “Stalinism in Retrospect.” She prefaced her remarks by noting that affixing the suffix “-ism” to Stalin’s name is an undeserved compliment. It suggests that there is a theory that could be derived from Stalin’s words and deeds. Indeed, by saying “Stalinism,” Professor Arendt feels that one puts Stalin on the same level as Lenin and Leninism—which is not possible. Professor Arendt explained that to talk in the same way about politicians such as Stalin—and even Lenin, to some extent—as we do about true theoreticians such as Hegel and Marx is misleading. Professor Arendt turned at this point to a consideration of the phrase

6. Columbia University’s Seminar on Communism ran, under a range of titles, from 1959 to 1990.
7. “Stalinism in Retrospect” (Columbia University Seminar on Communism) is available in two locations: Box 14, Folder 1 (1971–72) of the University Seminars Records: http://tinyurl.com/och3ynk; and The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, Subject File, http://tinyurl.com/ownlycd (both accessed June 4, 2015). The seminar is published here courtesy of the Trustees of Columbia University, and Jerome Kohn and the Hannah Arendt Blücher Literary Trust. I am grateful to Summer Hart and Jocelyn Archive at Columbia University for their help in locating and expediting the publication of this talk. Ms. Hart and I have been unable to trace the name of the rapporteur, to whom thanks are also due. Part of the research on which this article is based was generously supported by a Fellowship in the Humanities and Social Sciences funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Committee [grant number: PF14A1]. All emphases are in the original. Typographical errors have been corrected, and small stylistic changes have been made. Footnotes are the editor’s.
8. Just as problematic was the tendency for Stalinism to summon its critical negation in “anti-Stalinism,” an idea Arendt believed to be both confused and evasive. Speaking to the socialist-leaning Rand School in New York in 1948, she warned that American leftists who were sincere in their opposition to totalitarianism gave the mistaken impression that they were simply rejecting one part of it: Stalinism. Nazis, too, were anti-Stalinist as was Yugoslavia’s Tito. The expression “anti-Stalinism” had the unfortunate association of a totalitarian intra-party quarrel. Anti-Stalinism was also symptomatic of a deeper intellectual malaise. It suggested that sections of the American left had failed to reappraise their political convictions in the light of recent political events. Anti-Stalinism may have meant something real in the late 1920s when the fate of the Bolshevik party hung in the balance and when Trotsky and his associates in the so-called “United Opposition” were struggling for their positions and, soon, their lives. But now (that is, in the 1940s) the expression was no more than a sclerotic cliché. The real adversary for the American left should plainly be Bolshevism as such, just as Nazism, and not Hitlerism, was their adversary. Alas, anti-Stalinism was all too often merely a convenient bolt-hole for intellectuals who refused to go the whole way; it was also attractive to those who had made foreign-policy issues their primary concern, “armchair strategists who marshal forces of the world for and against Stalin,” but who had yet to construct a sensible pluralist agenda at home. See “Rand School Lecture,” in Essays in Understanding 1930–1954, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 220.
“in retrospect.” Why, she asked, do we look at “Stalinism” now; what is different today, when we view “Stalinism,” from the situation ten or twenty years ago? Very little new source material has appeared since 1960, she continued, on the Stalinist period (which is described as the period from 1928 to 1953). However, since Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech,” a great number of incidents (which suggest opposition within Russia itself) as well as a number of books have come to the forefront. In particular, there have been some particularly noteworthy new books. The “key” books among these include Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge*; Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope*; and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*. These books are “new” and noteworthy for many reasons: 1) All of these books have not been published in Russia, but are well-known there; 2) All are written by innocent victims; in contrast to Khrushchev and those to whom he made the Secret Speech, these three writers were entirely uninvolved in Stalin’s crimes politically. Khrushchev and his “audience” were accomplices of Stalin; 3) With these books, for the first time, we hear the voice of Russians themselves, and not of emigrants; 4) None of these three authors is a “theorist”; none constructs “models” of totalitarianism or other “systems.” Professor Arendt noted that we, in the West, probably constructed models to salvage whatever rational elements could be rescued from what was, “in actuality, a madhouse.” She suggested that these books make us take another look at the question “to what extent do our models relate to sheer reality?” 5) Lastly, these books do not tell us anything “new,” or anything that we did not know in principle—except the “one thing we did not know and could not have known: that the whole gruesome truth, or half-truth, must have been well known in Russia, and, today, is completely known there.”

Professor Arendt explained that these three books are full of small stories and anecdotes that, although they change nothing theoretically, “change the whole taste” of the period to Western historians. She then recounted some examples to


10. By “emigrants” Arendt is probably alluding to internees studied by Harvard University’s Refugee Interview Project (1949–54). The internees—a mixture of Red Army deserters, prisoners of war, and forced laborers—were interviewed in Displaced Persons’ camps located in the zones of Germany under Western control. Funded by the United States Air Force and exemplifying cutting-edge social-scientific analysis, the Project was directed by Clyde Kluckhohn (a cultural anthropologist), but led mostly by Alex Inkeles (a sociologist) and Raymond Bauer (a psychologist). On its formation, achievements, and limitations, see David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 43-70, 182-183. The Project’s summary report, *How the Soviet System Works* (1956; published as a book in the same year [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press]), drew a picture of citizen accommodation in the USSR that deviated markedly from Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism. Soviet life was governed by a police dictatorship, but the regime had much legitimacy, and significant support, among workers and managers; only the peasants were unremittingly hostile. Emphasizing social adaptation over state coercion, *How the Soviet System Works* considered incentives rather than ideology to be the driver of citizen compliance.

11. Arendt’s interlocutors never questioned this distinction but it should make historians pause. If we discover that 25,000 more people died in Stalin’s purge cycle than was previously known, this
illustrate this point. From Medvedev’s book, she recounted the stories of Stalin arresting the relatives (especially wives) of those officials close to him whom he did not arrest, and the story about the arrest of Kuusinen’s son.\textsuperscript{12} She pointed out that Solzhenitsyn, who could not have known Medvedev’s book, recounts a similar incident. She suggested that it must have been known that this was the way that Stalin operated. Professor Arendt explained that Solzhenitsyn’s few chapters on Stalin provide a better understanding of “who Stalin actually was” than Deutscher or Souvarine do in their biographies of Stalin.\textsuperscript{13} She then cited the incident when the Minister of State Security pleads with Stalin (in \textit{The First Circle}) to “give us back capital punishment.”\textsuperscript{14} Stalin replies that he had thought about this already—isn’t Abakumov\textsuperscript{15} afraid that he will be the first one to be shot? Professor Arendt explained that, with these three books, she will stress the “subjective factor”—what kind of person Stalin was. This incident, which highlights the pleasure Stalin took from the humiliation of others in his immediate presence, reminds one, in some ways, of Hitler, although the comparison is really very different. The incidents of the arrest of relatives also illustrate the pleasure Stalin gained from humiliating his immediate associates.

Differences are apparent in these three books, Professor Arendt continued. Medvedev holds to an “official line” among the opposition. He is still a convinced communist and/or Marxist. It is important to understand that this is not simply a question of personal opinion. Medvedev is somehow “official among the unofficial.” It is “unwritten law,” Professor Arendt explained, that when you come to terms with the past in the Soviet Union, you have got to speak in a certain way, acknowledging the progress that ensued, despite the aberrations. She quoted a passage from Nadezhda Mandelstam that deals with this precise issue: “We have been told to be discriminating in the way we talk about the past. The only approved way is to show that, however bad things may have been for you, is unlikely to upset an extant theory of the purge cycle itself. It simply adds to its horror. Similarly, the location of a historical document, in a previously lost SS archive, stating that “Celtic” inhabitants of Britain were targeted for extermination, would certainly raise eyebrows but merely confirm pre-existent knowledge about the bizarre Nazi obsession with “race selection.” But now consider a very different hypothetical discovery: that NKVD troops had opposed murdering the reserve officers at Katyn and, even while failing in their rebellion, had impeded other comparable massacres in Poland. That story would surely change the way we think about the Soviet secret police and its chain of command. When, accordingly, is a detail or story simply a repetitive particular, an inconsequential fact? When, conversely, does it contain fertile theoretical possibilities? The answer is likely to depend as much on the theorist and on the theoretical framework as on the detail. And if the three books’ “small stories and anecdotes change nothing theoretically,” but “change the whole taste” of the period, as the Columbia rapporteur records, is this not stretching the distinction between stories and theories to breaking point? A period that tastes different after reading books about it suggests that we should be cautious about predigested theoretical categories.

\textsuperscript{12} See Medvedev, \textit{Let History Judge}, 309-311. Otto Wille Kuusinen (1881–1946) was a Finnish-born Communist revolutionary. He worked in Soviet military intelligence and was a member of the Politburo under both Stalin and Khrushchev. In 1937, his son, Esa, was among those arrested during the Great Purge of the 1930s. He survived captivity.


\textsuperscript{14} Chapter 20 of \textit{The First Circle}: “Give us Back Capital Punishment, Iosif Vissarionovich.”

\textsuperscript{15} Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov (1908–1954) was a leading state security official during the Stalin regime. Arrested in 1952, he was executed in 1954.
you nevertheless remain faithful to the idea of Communism, always able to distinguish the truly important—our ultimate objective—from minor factors—such as your own ruined life. Nobody worries about the inherent absurdity of this approach.”

Professor Arendt explained that Mrs. Mandelstam tells us details that we did not know, it is true—but that we hardly would have dared to hope were true: namely, that there must have been a certain number of people who at no time changed their values. At no time did such people believe that history moves forward, sacrificing victims in its inexorable path. These people did know what was and what was not a crime even during that period. Professor Arendt reflected on how very difficult it must have been to “keep such integrity of one’s own mind” during those years. Other may have doubted during those years, but Nadezhda Mandelstam never doubted, Professor Arendt explained—she knew. She was able to distinguish among what she believed, what she had to do, and what was simply lying. Professor Arendt described *Hope Against Hope* as “one of the great human documents” of the century. The book is all the more remarkable, she continued, because this woman is not an artist; she is not a writer; “she is only a great moral personality.”

Solzhenitsyn, in *The First Circle*, really tells us in great detail, according to Professor Arendt, “what kind of a madhouse it was.” He takes away all the notions that Professor Arendt suggests we are inclined to have about “Stalin the Useful One.” Stalin was not “The Useful One,” according to Professor Arendt, but a “wrecker” of incredible proportions. Industrialization and Stalin’s dekulakization were, she continued, disasters of incredible proportions. Professor Arendt explained that the main thing to remember when we think of Stalin is the destructiveness of his rule since 1934.

Professor Arendt reflected, once again, on Medvedev’s book. She explained that Medvedev still believes in Bolshevik myth, in a “correct line.” He constantly talks about “mistakes” in regard to the intraparty struggle. Even the title of this book, *Let History Judge*, is a Marxist or Hegelian title. It is not the kind of title


17. Even in the worst of times in Soviet Russia, pockets of plurality survived. Of itself, this is not a surprising finding; from the very beginning, the concept of totalitarianism had exposed itself to the weakness of potentially exaggerated claims. How total was totalitarianism? An ambition of total domination was one thing, reality quite another. David Riesman, who, in 1948, read Part III of *Origins* in draft, made just this point. Arendt was not insensible to this problem. She was aware that reality constantly threatened to leak into the fictitious world that totalitarianism created; truly global rule was a fantasy. But *Origins* contains not a single word on the possibility that social loyalties persisted under totalitarian conditions. How could they? Her argument was that totalitarianism severed human bonds and created unprecedented loneliness, an “antisocial situation” (478). In contrast, *Hope against Hope* shows that terror was never sufficiently total, and ideology never sufficiently penetrative, to smash fully humane values. Today that conclusion is amply documented. See, among others, Tsvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, transl. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Henry Holt, 1997); Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Anchor, 2004); Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). I examine David Riesman’s critique of Arendt in chapter 2 of *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
that either Solzhenitsyn or Mandelstam would have chosen for what they have to say. Professor Arendt also remarked that Medvedev, who is against personality cults, has such a cult of his own: he worships Lenin.18

Professor Arendt explained that, although she is interested in the “subjective factor,” she does not want to raise the question of the psychology of Stalin. This would be a more complicated question. To talk about this, one would have to raise the question of why men become evil and what is evil in man. The subject today is simpler. Professor Arendt suggested, as an illustration, that Stalin’s suspiciousness was entirely rational and natural given the fact that Stalin knew what he had to do. Stalin’s general contempt for all people, illustrated so well in Medvedev’s book, also helps to explain his actions. This raises the question, Professor Arendt noted, of why so many people conformed to Stalin’s demands.

Professor Arendt explained that these three books stress the notion of mediocrity. This is an important thing to stress. Nonetheless, she explained that you cannot be mediocre and accomplish what Stalin did. This does not really explain why people conformed during these years.

Professor Arendt also explained that these three books do away with a number of theories about Stalin, including the following: 1) that Stalin was necessary to unite the country; 2) that Stalin was necessary to unite the Communist Party, which was chronically susceptible to splits; 3) that Stalin was necessary for industrialization; 4) that Stalin (and Stalinism) was a set necessity of a revolution; and 5) that Stalinism was the outcome of Leninism. All these myths, including the myth of the personality cult, somehow have the effect, Professor Arendt stressed, of denying (implicitly rather than explicitly) the sheer criminality of the whole regime. This criminality is illustrated by the well-known notion of the Secret Police: Give us a man and we will make a case. In 1936 Stalin stressed that the “inalienable quality, required of every Bolshevik under present conditions, should be to recognize an enemy of the Party, no matter how well he may be masked.”19 In other words, Professor Arendt explained, Stalin commanded “Thou shalt bear false witness against thy neighbor.” In this way, everybody was involved in the criminality of the whole regime—whatever the reason (family, apartment, job, etc.) they did what they did.20

18. Arendt is alluding to such remarks as “Truth was the main weapon of Lenin and the Leninist party in their struggle for socialism,” Let History Judge, xxvii. The sharp distinction between the moral Lenin and the cruel Stalin is a Medvedevian motif.

19. Arendt is quoting from Stalin’s Mastering Bolshevism (1937): “In the closed letter of July 29, 1936, regarding the spying and terroristic activity of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc, the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. called on the Party organization to show the maximum vigilance, to be able to recognize the enemies of the people no matter how well masked. It says in the closed letter ‘Now when it has been proved that the Trotskyite-Zinovievite scum unite all the most bitter and sworn enemies of the working people of our country—spies, agents provocateurs, diversionists, White Guards, kulaks, etc.—in the struggle against Soviet power, when every distinguishing mark has been obliterated between these elements on the one hand and the Trotskyites and Zinovievites on the other, all our Party organizations, all members of the Party must understand that the vigilance of Communists is necessary in every field and in all situations. An indispensable quality of every Bolshevik in the present conditions must be the ability to recognize the enemy of the Party no matter how well he be masked.’” http://www.marx2mao.com/Stalin/MB37.html (accessed June 11, 2015).

20. “For just as Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’ actually meant to make the command ‘Thou shalt kill’ binding for the elite of the Nazi party, Stalin’s pronouncement prescribed: ‘Thou shalt bear false testimony,’ as a guiding rule for the conduct of all members of the Bolshevik party” (Origins, xxxiii).
Thus, Professor Arendt explained, *sheer criminality was used as an instrument of organization.* All people were organized on the basis of crimes they had themselves committed. Stalin, she continued, understood that criminality itself can be “turned upside down” and used as an organizational principle. While it is true that many governments have committed crimes for reasons of state—and for less lofty reasons—criminality as a *principle* is very different from crimes of state. Torture, for example, is usually a very utilitarian instrument. However, when torture develops—as it did in the SS in Germany—beyond an instrument for obtaining desired information into something else, where torture becomes the master—then, torture becomes “torture on principle.” This is qualitatively different from simple torture. Criminality as a principle demands that *everyone* be involved in crime. The distinction between torturer and victim is blurred. This was true during the purges in Russia, according to Professor Arendt. In such a system, the line between the ruling class (or ruling bureaucracy) and a suffering mass of people is also blurred. There is no longer a distinction between the class that inflicts and the class that suffers. This, she continued, is what makes the whole thing so very frightening.

We often try to make what happened seem less harmful by talking about “despotism,” Professor Arendt remarked. While Stalin was a despot, Stalinism was not a despotism. From the point of view of those who lived under this regime, Professor Arendt explained, everything depends on the personality of the despot. The difference between Lenin and Stalin on this score is greater than the difference between Lenin and Roosevelt, or Lenin and Churchill. In that sense, one cannot simply remark that despotism in Stalinist Russia grew out of Leninism.

We do not get any nearer to the phenomenon with which we deal, Professor Arendt explained, when we point out similarities (for example, between Stalin and Hitler, or Franco, or Mussolini, or Mao). All the similarities, she stressed, become a kind of excuse for what actually happened. Rather, one must recognize that in the 30s and 40s there was an “invasion of criminality” on an almost unprecedented scale.

If we try to consider the question of explanations, it is probably true that “the revolutionaries in Russia were probably the last people in the world who would be able to judge correctly the sheer ‘evilness’ of the regime,” Professor Arendt pointed out. The idea that evil should decide history was certainly unthinkable.

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21. Already in the 1966 Preface to Part III of *Origins*, Arendt granted what she called the “gigantic criminality of the Stalin regime” and the “criminality of the regime as a whole” (xxix). Her statement in the Columbia seminar goes further still: criminality, we are now informed, is a “principle” or an “organizational principle” of Bolshevism just as—another innovation—extermination is a “principle” of National Socialism (see below). A thinker less theoretical than Arendt might invoke the term “principle” with a degree of nonchalance. But Arendt herself had for a long time pondered whether totalitarianism was indeed governed by a principle and, if so, what it might be. In “Ideology and Terror,” chapter 13 of *Origins*, Arendt had settled on a conclusion: if terror constitutes the nature or essence of totalitarianism, ideology defined its principle or quasi principle. This explicit amendment of Montesquieu that, simultaneously, added a fourth regime to the classical triptych, was among her most ambitious theoretical claims. In the Columbia seminar it appears to receive a significant attenuation. For a clarification of Arendt’s concept of principle, see Lucy Cane, “Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 1 (2015), 55-75.
for them—it went “against their grain.” Indeed, she noted, it is still rather hard for us to take as well.

Professor Arendt noted that if we ask about the chances for the emergence of such evil leaders, the specifics of the Russian revolution have very little to do with it. Regarding these specifics, Professor Arendt suggested that Stalin is much more the successor of Rasputin than the successor of Lenin. It is obvious, she noted, that in times of crisis anything can happen—and revolution is the greatest crisis in the life of a nation. The crisis of revolution is a break in continuity. However, to believe that Stalin is the logical continuity of what Lenin started is “utterly mistaken.” What would have been logical after Lenin, according to Professor Arendt, would have been “despotism through collective leadership—a triumvirate of not very gifted people: precisely that mediocrity that they wrongly ascribed to Stalin.” The complete disaster of Stalinism, however, represented a total break in the continuity of the regime.

Thus, we are left not with the question “what is evil,” but rather with the question “what are the organizational principles of evil?” It is here, Professor Arendt stressed, that we have a great deal left to learn. We would then examine the question of what makes people support evil and march into self-destruction.

Professor Arendt noted that Solzhenitsyn describes this problem marvelously in The First Circle. While we know about some elements in this process, such as the need to atomize society and sow distrust, there are many other aspects that we do not fully understand. In conclusion, Professor Arendt suggested that in a mass society it would be worthwhile for political theorists to think about—and ask why—people act against their own self-interest, for this is exactly what they did in the Stalinist case.

Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski began the discussion period by referring back to Professor Arendt’s initial remarks about the fact that “Stalinism” did not deserve the “-ism.” He suggested that, in another sense, Stalinism did indeed deserve the “ism” since it did create a political system that was quite enduring. Indeed, the system has endured for twenty years since the death of Stalin. In this sense, Professor Brzezinski continued, isn’t Stalinism a more enduring accomplishment that anything Hitler would have created? And, lastly, if this is so, what is it about Stalinism that made it so enduring? It must, he suggested, be more than

22. The distinction, as phrased here, is cryptic. It supposes that one can sensibly talk about the organizational effects of some entity whose nature one desists from identifying. It is like wishing to discuss the organizational principles of Catholicism without delineating Catholicism as a specific Christian confession, or the organizing principle of capitalism without identifying capitalism as a system of commodity production. The sense of the distinction might be saved, however, if Arendt is saying that the organization of a phenomenon actually delineates its nature. In that case, however, we are presented not with a distinction but with an identification of organization and nature.

23. All informed readers of Arendt know the stakes that the concept of evil had assumed in Arendt’s lifetime. The controversy over Eichmann in Jerusalem, ignited in the early 1960s, has never really abated. Yet one is struck by how casually Arendt and her interlocutors (below) discuss the notion of evil. Theoretically unburdened of “banality,” it floats in a pre-Eichmann medium of radical evil, less in the Kantian sense than in that of common intuition, invoking extreme wickedness and malevolence. Stalin is evil not for his banality but for his calculated pleasure in humiliating his victims. This grotesque personal quality is itself a magnet of fascination for those in his immediate circle.

24. Brzezinski’s shifting understanding of totalitarianism, his relinquishing of the concept, and his theoretical departures from Arendt are well documented in Engerman, Know Your Enemy, 221-226.
simply the work of a “madman” or a “criminal”—and perhaps it is more than “an evil.” An “evil,” Professor Brzezinski remarked, is very much a personal quality that is very difficult to transmit and to maintain. Yet the Stalinist system has had remarkable staying power. In reply, Professor Arendt strongly disagreed with Professor Brzezinski’s suggestion that the regime that followed Stalin’s death is the same. She cited the very different way each of the following phenomena would have been treated under Stalin’s regime: 1) the Hungarian Revolution and its aftermath; 2) the aftermath of Czechoslovakia in 1968; 3) the appearance of samizdat. Furthermore, she noted that the category of “objective enemy” has disappeared and that in Russia today you must do something in order to be persecuted, contrary to the pattern in the Stalinist period.25 Samizdat has suggested that there is a real opposition in Russia that is “very much alive”—something that did not exist in the Stalin years. We are now dealing with a different kind of despotism in Russia, Professor Arendt continued. While crimes are still committed by the state, they are rational and for utilitarian principles. The difference seems enormous. She noted that Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn, and Medvedev are all still very much alive in Russia—even though they wrote the books mentioned earlier today. Professor Arendt also noted that, in regard to Hitler, we all suffer from an underestimation of Hitler. She cited the potential significance of the “extermination principle” that permeated Hitler’s grand schema.

Professor Charles Gati asked if Professor Arendt would clarify what she meant by characterizing her approach today as a “subjective view.” Does this suggest that she is dissatisfied with more complex conceptualizations? With the comparative approach? Or does it mean that Professor Arendt simply wants to emphasize the personality trait to a greater extent? In reply, Professor Arendt explained that whenever she used the term “subjective factor,” she did so implying question marks around the phrase. In a sense, this was meant as a joke—for “subjective view” is the way Marxists tend to talk. What she meant by using the phrase was simply that the factor of human action should be stressed as compared to the great forces of history. She explained that she was, perhaps, overly impressed by these new books that have come out of Russia. They have rekindled an interest in the developments in Russia. The extent to which these writers stress the “subjective factor,” in particular, is extremely striking.26

25. Objective enemies” are people innocent of any crime other than their existence. They are categorical foes: Jews, gypsies, landlords, priests, indeed, any group that the regime has targeted for destruction. They stand convicted for what they are and what they might do as carriers of tendencies. And their identity, or rather their identification, is constantly changing. Foreseeing the extermination of the Jews, the Nazis started preparing for the liquidation of the Polish people and certain categories of Germans. The Bolsheviks graduated from the descendants of the ruling classes to the kulaks, Russians of Polish origin (between 1936 and 1938), the “Tartars and the Volga Germans during the war, former prisoners of war and units of the occupational forces of the Red Army, and Russian Jewry after the establishment of the Jewish state” (Origins, 424).

26. Arendt’s regard for the “subjective factor” was no late improvisation at Columbia. Probably the single most overlooked aspect of The Origins of Totalitarianism is the attention Arendt gives to Stalin and Hitler as totalitarian leaders. Her treatment is easy to miss. Whereas elsewhere in Origins, Arendt devotes entire sections or subsections specifically to “mob,” “masses,” and “elite,” no text heading announces the leaders of totalitarian movements. Her approach had a clear rationale. On Arendt’s account, Stalin and Hitler are not separate from the masses they impersonate and the movements they lead. They are entirely integrated into them. The “real role” of Leaders, she says, is “to drive the
Professor Peter Ludz asked about the relationship between the political philosopher and the political theorist. What is the basis for all these judgments Professor Arendt has made about the system? What role do values play here? Do we have a philosopher looking at history? The most important point, he stressed, is what is the implicit model or theory that underlies model-construction and its relation to reality? In reply, Professor Arendt explained that a proper answer to such a wide-ranging and significant question is impossible at present—it would be much too long. Briefly, however, she explained that, in contradistinction to what most people think, she believes that political philosophy is not the same as natural philosophy. There is a tension between the words “political” and “philosophy.” In the case of politics, the philosopher no longer speaks in the name of mankind, Professor Arendt explained. Here, regarding politics, he has a “special ax to grind”—one that predates even Plato. One of the main difficulties with philosophers, she continued, is that they always talk about man, whereas in politics, we always speak about men (in the plural). She noted that this raises the far more complex question of the relationship between thinking and action.

Professor Jane Shapiro suggested that Nadezhda Mandelstam must be viewed as more than simply an “intelligent woman” who lived during this period. Her background, associates, and even her “mission” to preserve her husband’s poetry all suggest that she was more than this. Professor Arendt agreed with her on this point, as she did the next point Professor Shapiro made, which was that we need to distinguish between Party writers (for example, Medvedev, Evgenia Ginzburg) who write the kind of works discussed today, and non-Party writers

movement forward at any price and if anything to step up its speed” (Origins, 375, fn. 89). The purge is the most important mechanism of movement, accompanied by the fabrication of enemies and the creation of a new pseudo-juridical category, the possible crime. By such means, Stalin ensured after 1934 that the regime remained durably unstable. Purges impede the establishment of settled routines, explode the principle of seniority, sever bonds of loyalty and solidarity among colleagues, create a profusion of new jobs, offer opportunities for rapid advancement for party members in lower rungs of the administration, and cement the dependence of all employees on the Leader (Origins, 323, 390, 431-432). The Nazi counterpart to the purge, after the dispatch of Ernst Röhm, is “the notion of racial ‘selection which can never stand still’” [Arendt quotes Heinrich Himmler], and which requires “a constant radicalization of the standards by which the selection, i.e. the extermination of the unfit, is carried out” (391). See also Zhigniew Brzezinski, The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

27. Arendt was herself a theorist, but she evidently felt a greater affinity to political “writers” than to “philosophers.” To students at Cornell University she explained that writers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville composed their work on the basis “of political experiences and for the sake of politics.” Because politics for them had no goal “higher than itself,” they did not bother themselves with such questions as “What is the end of government?” In contrast, the philosophers “write from the outside and they want to impose non-political standards on politics. This is the tradition since Plato, or rather since Parmenides. You have to read them differently: You cannot interpret Machiavelli or Montesquieu as though they were philosophers and wanted to teach wisdom. You can’t demand the same standard of consistency because this is not important for them. There is an atmosphere and a consistency of thinking, approaching things; there are fundamental convictions but there are no systems” (“From Machiavelli to Marx” [1965], Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress [Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975], image 1).

28. The best discussion of “plurality” is in Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 15, 27, 62, and passim.

29. Her husband was the poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), who perished in the Gulag.

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(such as Solzhenitsyn or Mandelstam). The Party people do feel an obligation to explain the phenomenon of Stalin in the course of the development of the Soviet state, whereas the non-Party people do not feel this obligation. Professor Shapiro asked Professor Arendt if she had any explanation for the fact that Hitler and Stalin both came to power at the same time. Professor Arendt suggested that she, herself, has asked this question. It might be possible to argue that the break of continuity in the twentieth century—even before World War I—was so great that “anything could happen.” But this is really no explanation, she noted. It is very hard to explain the concurrent rise of Stalin and Hitler, she concluded.

Professor Ki-shik Han asked if it is possible for us to explain the origin and sources of the evil character of Stalinism in terms of psychological and religious factors. Convinced of their moral righteousness, certain people will turn to evil methods as a means of eradicating what they view to be a worse evil: the existing society. He cited Russian traditional religious patterns as a contributing factor to this mentality. Professor Arendt remarked, in reply, that this could, possibly, be a partial explanation for the people who helped Stalin, but not for Stalin himself. Stalin, she explained, did not want to abolish anything; he was “utterly cynical.” She suggested that Stalin did not believe in communism. A more important question, she continued, is why were the other people (who may have believed what Professor Han has suggested) so blind to this utterly cynical and evil character of Stalin? Is it, possibly, because they could not conceive of this evil in Stalin? Professor Arendt also noted that the mentality that Professor Han suggests (that is, that evil is the only way to get rid of evil) is a very old concept, which, in Professor Arendt’s opinion, is both narrow and counter-productive. She asked about the consequences of such a concept on a general level, and concluded with the thought that “One evil deed done for a good cause makes the world worse; one good deed done for an evil cause makes the world better.”

Mr. Bogdan Denitch remarked that he is inclined, since he considers himself a Marxist, to discount the personality factor, which Professor Arendt seems to stress. He noted that the people around Stalin did not become his lackeys until “very late in the game.” If, he continued, Stalin was so much of an aberration, why wasn’t he assassinated? Both Professors Arendt and Bialer suggested that, in part, this is because Marxists do not believe in assassination. Mr. Denitch remarked that it is true that assassination is not perceived by Marxists to be an agent of history, but, according to Professor Arendt’s analysis, Stalin was “outside history”—that is, an aberration. In the sense that Stalin was indeed an aberration, assassination, it seems, would have made sense even to the Marxists around Stalin. Professor Arendt suggested that the Marxists believed that Stalin could not be a wrecker, that he was “necessary.” Mr. Denitch pointed out the fact that, by

31. Also Medvedev: “In fact Stalin was not a Marxist” (Let History Judge, 333).
32. On this adage, see also Hannah Arendt, “Hermann Broch,” in Men in Dark Times (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 111-151, at 148: “If we would express it paradoxically—and we invariably become entangled in paradoxes as soon as we attempt to judge action by the standards of doing—we can say: Every good action for the sake of a bad end actually adds to the world a portion of goodness; every bad action for the sake of a good end actually adds to the world a portion of badness. In other words, whereas for doing and producing ends are totally dominant over means, just the opposite is true for acting: the means are always the decisive factor.”
the 30s, a large number thought that Stalin was a criminal: highly destructive and dangerous. Professor Arendt noted that none of these people was sure of this, not even Trotsky. In reply to Mr. Denitch’s question why those people felt this way, Professor Arendt explained that they viewed everything “through the glasses of their theory,” as we do. She remarked that the most important thing, however, is to come “face to face with what you actually see.” The key factor here, in viewing and assessing Stalin and Stalinism, is “whether you want reality at any price.”

Mr. Joseph Maier asked Professor Arendt to explain that if Stalin was not a mediocrity (as Trotsky and others have suggested), what then was he? Professor Arendt explained that he was highly gifted—organizationally. Mr. Maier then asked why Stalin, who may be described as an incarnation of evil, espoused the communist ideology in particular? Professor Arendt suggested that Stalin could not have worked in the surroundings in which he happened to be in the early part of the revolution, and so on, without espousing this particular ideology. This relates, of course, to Stalin’s utter cynicism. Professor Brzezinski suggested that Stalin’s organizational strength may, in part, answer Mr. Denitch’s question concerning the fact that Stalin was not assassinated. Another factor related to this is simply the attraction of evil. Evil was one of the great strengths of Stalin. He had the capacity to attract people who were willing to subordinate themselves to him, not only out of fear, but also out of a kind of total commitment. Professor Brzezinski suggested that, perhaps, it was this intensification of certain qualities that are found in all of us (although good and evil are usually balanced) that made Stalin such a powerful historical figure and, indeed, protected him in a way. Professor Arendt expressed her complete agreement with Professor Brzezinski on this point. Professor Seweryn Bialer suggested that while this may be true for Hitler, the attractiveness of Stalin was an attraction of strength rather than of evil. Both Professor Arendt and Professor Brzezinski strongly disagreed with Professor Bialer on this point. Professor Brzezinski noted, with examples, that what happened in the Kremlin in the mid-30s was clearly an attraction of evil. This view is increasingly documented, he noted.

Professor Bialer noted that it is a contradiction in terms of Professor Arendt to speak of an “utterly cynical” Stalin and a totally evil Stalin. How, he asked, can something so evil be cynical? He also remarked that the worst evil is the evil that believes in something. He asked how it could be possible for Stalin—or anyone—to act without beliefs? How could Stalin possibly function as he did without beliefs? He suggested that Stalin had a concept of an “orderly”—almost Prussian—socialism. Professor Bialer also suggested that Solzhenitsyn should be considered in a different category from the others who view “Stalin in Retrospect.” Solzhenitsyn describes his own experiences—in this sense he is an extraordinary realist. However, in the sections where Solzhenitsyn writes about Stalin, Professor Bialer feels that he is describing how people in his situation saw Stalin at that time, and not necessarily how Stalin actually was. These sections seem a bit false to Professor Bialer.33

33. The text ends abruptly at this point.