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# THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History  
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000





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## 6.2.3 Ideologies in Contemporary History (c.1900–2000)

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### Introduction: Typologies and Realities

Ideology acquired a new form and life in the *fin-de-siècle* period, becoming a major driver for the mobilisation of political movements, as well as the justification of state policies and the fuel for domestic and international political conflict. In a way, the notion of ideology regained some of its initial meaning as it was formulated by Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) in his *Elémens d'idéologie* (1796): a doctrine of truthful ideas that would serve to create a rational and just social order. Yet it also remained coloured by the way Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and their followers defined ideology: as the opaque justification of social, economic and political power, or as the hegemonic framework through which people (mis)interpreted their true interests, possibilities, and expectations. Ideology thus became both a set of ideas on a society in need of cultivation, monitoring, and dispersal through education, but also a driver of politics that should be treated with suspicion.

Most of the ideologies of the nineteenth century were only ideologies in retrospect, or in the eyes of political opponents. From a critical Marxist perspective, liberalism and conservatism were true ideologies: poorly disguised expressions of class interest that claimed impartiality for a partisan view of society. In a way, this was also the fate of nationalism, the third main ideology of the nineteenth century. Even if nationalists claimed to formulate a prospect for the nation as a whole, for Marxists this notion was based on a delusional understanding of the interests of the people in a capitalist society, interests that in reality transcended the borders of national and also religious allegiances. It was in contestation against these conservative, liberal, and national ideologies that *fin-de-siècle* socialists formulated a set of ideas that developed into an alternative understanding of ideology. Based on a critical diagnosis of the ills of capitalist society, they deliberately proposed a political

programme containing concrete steps towards a future socialist or communist society, to be carried out by an organisation of workers whose capture of the power of the state was the instrument needed to achieve these goals.

This brief typology of the main ideologies defining the political spectrum around the turn of the century were in practice mostly ideal types. Many political movements came to represent a hybrid of these ideologies, mixed in with various local influences. A prime example of such a 'hybrid' ideology was Zionism. A strict typology of ideologies thus disregards internal inconsistencies and disagreements within ideologies.

## Conservatives and Liberals

One important aspect of the transformation of ideology into a programme for social revolution or reform is its function in mobilising people to follow the ideological vanguard towards utopia. In the first decades of the twentieth century, tremendous developments in mass media and communications enabled ideas to travel far, both geographically and socially—from the intellectual urban elite to a wider working class in both the cities and the countryside. As a result, ideology became expressed in enticing slogans and formulaic arguments, aimed more towards mobilising the already-converted masses than convincing political opponents.

This shift in the nature of ideology had a serious impact on conservative and liberal politicians and their followers. These figures had thus far justified their political dominance in most of Western Europe by the claim that their ideas were the rational and impartial views of bourgeois men—those with sufficient property to have a stake in society and an interest in social order and stability. Political contestation thus remained limited to civilised parliamentary debate between men with money. Yet these men were largely defenceless against the claim that every decent and productive member of society should have equal political rights. Middle-class women notably supported the feminist cause for the right to vote, often to the consternation of most men. Yet both liberals and conservatives also became increasingly concerned that the 'social question', put on the agenda by socialists in the 1870s, was indeed the result of genuine flaws in the capitalist social order.

In response, conservatives at the turn of the century tried to find a new social basis for support by embracing nationalism as a tool to mobilise larger groups of people. They also merged with confessional groups, with whom they shared concerns about the disruption of familial and communal ties by the corrosive effects of capitalism, as well as a distrust in the subversion of social hierarchies by the egalitarian logic of democratisation.

Notably, the Catholic Church encouraged its followers to militate against secularist and anticlerical tendencies. In Protestant regions of Europe, a new kind of conservative party came to the fore, challenging the legacy of nineteenth-century revolutions. They mobilised their middle- and lower-class supporters to demand political rights and to act against the liberal state. A third variety of conservative ideological innovation was developed by farmers and peasant smallholders. Inspired by a ruralist ideology, in which the values of the countryside were contrasted with the corruption of urban and industrial civilisation, peasant parties appeared at the turn of the century in Sweden, Austria and the Czech Lands, Polish Galicia, Croatia, and Bulgaria.

While this conservative reorientation was mainly focused on rural regions, the ideological transformation of liberalism primarily took place in urban, commercial, and industrial parts of Europe. From the end of the nineteenth century, some liberals began to shift towards a social liberalism, in which trust in *laissez-faire* was replaced by a substantial and programmatic role for the state in the economy, but which also looked for ways to broaden its support from the liberal middle class to the ‘respectable’ members of the labouring classes. This ‘Lib-Lab’ alliance was primarily an English phenomenon, although also elsewhere—in Germany, the Low Countries, and France—liberals tried to broaden their support base. This effort failed everywhere, however, due to the reluctance of liberals to stir up the people using ideological rhetoric. Nevertheless, liberals continued to look for reform resulting in the formulation—at a colloquium devoted to the work of Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) in Paris, 1938—of ‘neoliberalism’ as the most promising concept for liberalism’s renewal.

## Totalitarianism

Other liberals responded by turning towards authoritarianism, fearing that popular movements would embrace communism. They often coalesced with other opponents of Marxism, notably with Italian fascists and German National Socialists, only to discover that these ideological movements shared some practical realities with the much-despised Soviet communist state. These similarities were expressed in the overarching notion of totalitarianism. As the famous German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) argued in her classic work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), totalitarianism differed from authoritarian dictatorships in its total control over all aspects of social life, subjecting all individual interests to the interests of the state. Adopting a Darwinist idea of states immersed in a struggle for survival, totalitarian regimes saw individuals either as assets (productive workers or racially pure

specimens) that had to be nurtured, or as liabilities (enemies of the state or racially impure *Untermenschen*) that had to be eliminated.

The two main examples of totalitarian states at the time of Arendt’s writing were Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The underlying ideology of Nazi Germany was National Socialism. Despite its hybrid name, National Socialism was mostly a product of nationalism, with socialist ideals only featuring on the margins. It was also intimately connected to fascism, although it clearly differentiated itself from Italian fascism through its strong focus on race. In comparison to Nazi ideology, Italian fascism, represented since the early 1920s by Italy’s fascist leader Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), was more rooted in a grand Italian past, based on actual historical events, and aimed at expansion within Italy’s own regional sphere of the Mediterranean. In that sense, Italian fascism was much closer to classical nationalism and imperialism than National Socialism.



Fig. 1: Ludwig Hohlwein, Poster advertising for a propaganda calendar from the Nazi magazine *Neues Volk* (A New People) issued by the Nazi Party Office of Racial Policy (1937), CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ludwig\\_Hohlwein\\_NEUES\\_VOLK\\_1938\\_Kalender\\_des\\_Rassenpolitischen\\_Amtes\\_der\\_NSDAP\\_85\\_Rpf.\\_Aquarell\\_1937\\_Arische\\_Familie\\_Nazi\\_Party\\_Office\\_of\\_Racial\\_Policy\\_propaganda\\_calendar\\_cover\\_Pure\\_Aryan\\_family\\_No\\_known\\_copyright\\_restrictions.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ludwig_Hohlwein_NEUES_VOLK_1938_Kalender_des_Rassenpolitischen_Amtes_der_NSDAP_85_Rpf._Aquarell_1937_Arische_Familie_Nazi_Party_Office_of_Racial_Policy_propaganda_calendar_cover_Pure_Aryan_family_No_known_copyright_restrictions.jpg). This propaganda poster illustrates the Nazi ideals of an ‘Aryan’ German race and of ‘racial purity’.

By contrast, Nazi ideology went beyond the 'pure' nationalist belief in the right of a particular people (Germans) to possess its own nation-state. Instead, National Socialism created an uneasy cocktail of various political, pseudo-scientific, and pre-modern ideologies, practices, and outlooks. At its core, the Nazi worldview was based on two elements: an extreme and violent form of racial antisemitism (hatred of the Jewish people) and the desire to obtain *Lebensraum* (living space), preferably in Eastern Europe, for the expansion of the 'Aryan' German race. These two ingredients—antisemitism and *Lebensraum*—were intimately connected: the Nazis believed that Jews in both Germany and the rest of the world were part of a large conspiracy that prevented the Aryan 'master race' from reaching its full potential. Jews were accused of conspiring on the one hand with cosmopolitan capitalists in order to subvert the intricate link between German 'blood' and 'soil'. But according to the 'Judeo-Bolshevik Myth' also entertained by the Nazis, Jews were simultaneously conspiring with communists in the Soviet Union to bring a class division into the nation and to prevent Germany from expanding eastwards. The claim to *Lebensraum* in these regions was formulated with reference to a quasi-scientific racial hierarchy, used to justify the expulsion and extermination of a wider set of non-Aryan social and ethnic groups, including Romani people, Slavic peoples, and to some extent also the physically and mentally disabled and homosexuals. However, at the very bottom of the Nazi racial hierarchy were the Jews. The centrality of this virulent, racially defined antisemitism resulted in the death of six million European Jews in the Holocaust.

The Soviet Union was founded on communist principles. After the 1917 February Revolution, the socialists were in agreement that the principal aim was to create a classless society. However, division soon emerged. The Bolsheviks (literally 'those of the majority') followed Vladimir Lenin, who believed in the violent overthrow of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, in favour of the working class, the proletariat. By contrast, the Mensheviks ('the minority') had remained open to peaceful cooperation with bourgeois organisations while socialist revolutionaries laboured in rural areas on behalf of the large Russian peasant community. With the 1917 October Revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had seized power and by the spring of 1918, they continued to set the tone for the violently oppressive course that the Soviet Union was to fare in the decades to come, reaching its zenith during Joseph Stalin's reign from 1924 to 1953. Marxism-Leninism was transformed from an internationalist and idealistic project into a Stalinist, state-focused regime with nationalistic overtones. Admittedly, some elements of the strong egalitarianism that had underpinned Marx's original ideas were maintained in Stalinism. The Soviet state invested heavily in projects like women's labour participation, universal healthcare, and people-focused technology. Nevertheless, on the most fundamental level,



the only consistent logic of Stalinist ideology was the state and its survival, rather than the wellbeing of its citizens. In this context, disagreement with the 'correct ideological position' became an indication of political unreliability and a motive for persecution of political enemies, resulting in internecine feuds, deadly purges, and state-induced famines that cost millions of lives.

The Second World War represented the culmination of the ideological competition between the communist and national socialist varieties of totalitarianism. Just as Nazism had pursued a total conception of society, its defeat was also total. Nazi Germany was destroyed in terms of its military, material and social infrastructure, and most importantly, in ideological terms. After the extent of the genocide committed against Jews and other groups became manifest, the ideology that had legitimised it lost the support of the many who had initially accepted or embraced it. However, the defeat of Nazism was not coterminous with the victory of communism. For a short while after 1945, the Soviet Union and its ideology were held in high esteem, due to the sacrifice of millions of lives in its resistance against Nazi Germany. Yet in the part of Europe liberated by the Western Allied forces, the notion of totalitarianism served to identify Stalinism as an equally threatening ideology as Nazism. Soon, the division between communism and capitalism, between the one-party state and liberal democracy, came to define the frontline of the Cold War.

## After 1945: Sovietisation, Liberal Democracy, and Countercultures

Communism became the leading ideology in the European countries liberated by the Red Army, which the Soviet Union claimed for itself as its own 'sphere of influence'. Local communists backed by Soviet support became crucial actors in the new political system. Though the so-called 'People's democracies' were originally envisaged as an alternative, 'third way' between capitalism and socialism—between liberal democracy and the Soviet order—the totalitarian logic of communist political practice, as well as Cold War escalation, eventually led to the Sovietisation of Eastern Europe. In 1948, with the possible exception of Yugoslavia, specific 'national roads to socialism' were abandoned in the eastern bloc. With pressures and incentives from Moscow, Eastern European communists declared the Soviet pattern of a centralised, state-run economy to be the only valid form of 'socialist construction'. This also included the Stalinist practices of oppressing 'class enemies', purges and show trials, as well as collectivisation of agriculture and forced industrialisation.

The tension, however, between subordination to Soviet interests on the one hand, and the legacy of a national, more democratic and free vision of



socialism (and communism) on the other, persisted through the 1950s. Such Marxist revisionist tendencies manifested in the upheavals in the German Democratic Republic in 1953, in reform attempts in Poland and Hungary in 1956, and in the Czechoslovak 'Prague Spring' in 1968. The Soviet leadership under Khrushchev and later under Brezhnev realised that any profound reform of the Stalinist model could unleash uncontrollable social forces. Until the 1980s, the ruling communist ideology in Soviet bloc countries maintained its dogmatic and rigid nature. When the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his own reform programme (*perestroika*), this ideology quickly eroded, and as a result, the political order lost its ground. In 1989, socialist dictatorships broke down all over Eastern Europe and soon thereafter in the USSR as well.

After 1945, communism in Western Europe quickly became marginalised. Although the communist parties of France and Italy continued to mobilise mass support, they shared the fate of communists in other parts of Western Europe—excluded from political power, but also deprived of most of their electoral support. After the demise of liberalism and the destruction of democracy in the interwar period, both social democrats and conservative Christian democrats returned after 1945 in a mitigated form, based on the acceptance of an interventionist state and a limited democracy. Social and Christian democrats contested for electoral support on the basis of political programmes that differed marginally in ideological terms. As a result, the personalities of party leaders became crucial for electoral success.

In the course of the 1950s, the state of political contestation in Western Europe came to be characterised by leading intellectuals as the 'end of ideology'. On the one hand, Western liberal democracies were now presented as the alternative to ideological fanaticism. Yet from the early 1960s onwards, this kind of political pragmatism, focused on the delivery of material wealth in exchange for political acquiescence, was unmasked as slavish consumerism and technocratic rule. This made the end of ideology nothing more than the depletion of political imagination.

At the end of the 1960s, the understanding that liberal democracy and the welfare state were in fact the cause of political apathy and materialist self-interest provoked the rise of an ideological counterculture that combined individual liberation with new forms of solidarity. This took shape in a return to Marxism, but this time with a twist: the iron certainties of the Marxist analysis that had encased the unquestionable rule of communist parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was replaced by the inspiration of the early writings of Marx. This rediscovery of Marxism inspired some people to enter the communist parties, only to discover that the Stalinist cadres were unwilling to accept their new agenda. A similar experience plagued the

younger generation of party members in Eastern Europe, who had hoped to create a communism with a human face, until their hopes were crushed through repression, first in Hungary in 1956, and again during the Prague Spring in 1968.

Elsewhere in Europe, 1968 was the starting point for a range of new ideological experiments, in which liberation was primarily defined as breaking the chains of prejudice regarding gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, physical abilities, and psychological normality. These emancipatory ideals fuelled the mobilisation of new social movements, some of which, like the feminist movement and the black liberation movement, were not actually new. Others, like the gay and anti-psychiatry movements, exemplified new characteristics not just in terms of their aims, but also by their turn from collective emancipation to individual liberation.

This diversity gave the new ideologies of the 1970s an ambivalent character. On the one hand, they demonstrated a truly global orientation. These ideologies put transnational issues on the agenda, including the protection of the natural environment, resistance against nuclear energy, and the campaign for nuclear disarmament, reaching far beyond the borders of nation-states. Another global impetus was the connection of the fight against racism and capitalism with the struggle against colonialism and imperialism—including the cultural imperialism ascribed to the Pax Americana that undergirded the liberal-democratic consensus of the post-war period.

On the other hand, however, the new ideologies were decisively individualistic, based on the idea that collective social and global change began with individual reformation. This individualisation of ideological convictions made it increasingly problematic to formulate a common denominator for political mobilisation, with a devastating impact on the loyalty of voters to established political parties. In the end, the individualist streak of the new social movements also created a fertile breeding ground for the ideology that took over the world from 1980 onwards: neoliberalism.

## Neoliberalism

Although neoliberalism gained ground in the slipstreams of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, its pedigree was much older. The concept was first coined in 1938, and its main ideas were further developed in the 1940s and 1950s by Friedrich Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke, James Buchanan, and Milton Friedman. Even though the core of the neoliberal creed was the conviction that the market offered the most efficient mechanism for the distribution of goods, it rejected the classical liberal orthodoxy of *laissez-faire*. The market was superior, but also vulnerable and inherently unstable,

and therefore required a strong state to protect it from political interference. Neoliberal policies entailed restrictions on democratic influence, including the curtailment of trade unions and the imposition of strict budget limits. This would be accompanied by an educational, sometimes disciplinary, programme to compel people to become enterprising individuals—if not voluntarily, then by monetary incentive, or by punitive measures, if necessary.

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism conquered the world in a perfect ideological storm: the fragmentation of ideologies after the 1960s was accompanied by the demise of the post-war consensus over the values of liberal democracy and the welfare state. Even more decisive was the collapse of communism in the 1980s resulting in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. At the time, this was experienced as another end of ideology: now that the Soviet Union as the last vestige of communism was relegated to the dustbin of history (ironically a quotation from Marx himself), there were no serious contenders outside the ideology of the West, and as the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued, this meant “the end of history”. Now that ideologies no longer presented programmatic worldviews that vied for popular support, neoliberalism arguably became ideological in the alternative, Marxist sense of the term: the opaque justification of social, economic and political power, and the hegemonic framework by which people (mis)interpreted their true interests, possibilities and expectations. It is this legacy of what could be termed the Age of Ideologies that laid the foundations for global order in the twenty-first century.

## Discussion questions

1. What were the most important changes that ideologies underwent during the twentieth century?
2. In which ways was the Second World War an ideological conflict?
3. In which ways did neoliberalism differ from liberalism and why was this ideology so influential after the end of the Cold War?

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