

# History UNFOLDING

# THE AGE OF THE TOTALITARIANS



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# Introduction

## Tyranny and the 20th Century

Tyranny is as old as human history. But the 20th century gave the world a new word for a different, vastly more pervasive form of tyranny. That word is “totalitarian.”

Historians argue about this word. Not all of them accept the need for it. Still, there is no denying the fact that the modern industrial, military and communications technology of the past century gave authoritarian rulers powerful new tools to use in exercising their will to power. Perhaps just as importantly, the modern age saw the birth of ideologies of right and left justifying total state control and basing this justification on the need to eliminate entire classes of human beings.

Rulers such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot have seemed positively driven to achieve absolute and total control over all of the political, economic, social and even psychological aspects of their people’s lives. Given this, the word “totalitarian” seems apt.

In any case, the concept is explored in this booklet/transparency set by focusing primarily on the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin and on the terrible years of the 1930s and ‘40s. The set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several key themes in this story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **The Rise of the Dictators**

The illustrations here focus exclusively on Hitler and Stalin and the similar yet somewhat different ways in which they presented themselves to their people and justified their drive to total power.

### **The Total State**

The totalitarian state attempted to depict itself as larger than life itself. Through rallies, enormous state projects and many other ways it sought to convey an image of all-encompassing power. The lesson illustrates this theme and also looks at how this drive for power was justified by identifying malevolent race or class enemies, whole groups marked for destruction by the totalitarian dictators.

### **Genocide and Totalitarianism**

Both of the two great tyrannies of the 1930s and ‘40s resulted in acts of unspeakable genocide in which many millions perished.

### **Total War**

In addition to Hitler and Stalin, the dictators in Japan drove the world toward war in the 1930s. This lesson deals with the world war that resulted by posing the question: Is the totalitarian state inherently aggressive and does it have a need to find an outlet for such aggression in war?

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Age of the Totalitarians***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand the concept of totalitarianism and why it came to be used as a label for the uniquely powerful tyrannies of the 20th century.

# The Rise of the Dictators

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

Tyranny is certainly not new in human history. But in the 20th century, the modern industrial state made possible a new, more total kind of tyranny, hence the name “totalitarian.” The term calls to mind such things as a huge state bureaucracy, a vast secret police and prison network, a system of constant, ever-present political propaganda and total governmental control over the economy and society. Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime is often portrayed as the most brutal example of such a totalitarian system. In the photo on the right, Hitler’s rigid stance, salute, uniform and bearing convey a sense of unbending authority and total power. This cult of power was celebrated in huge spectacles, such as the one shown on the left. In them, the individual disappeared into a disciplined mass, a militarized nation in which all independent thought and feeling was to be eliminated.

**Illustration 2**

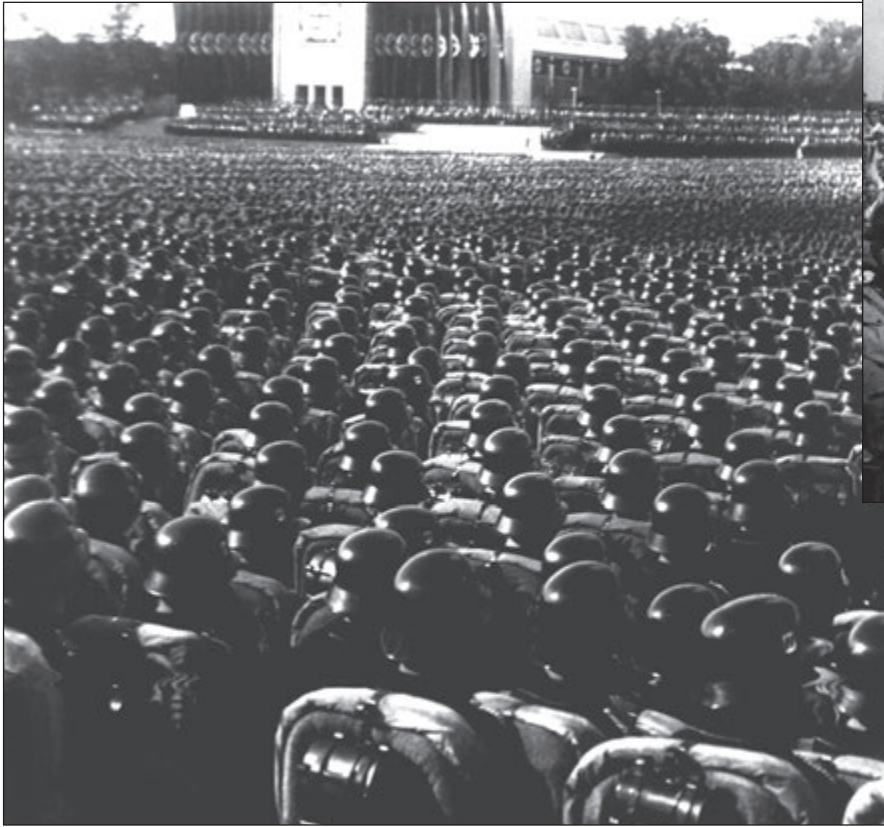
Along with Hitler, Joseph Stalin is the other name most closely linked with the term “totalitarian.” By 1929, he was the master of the Soviet Union’s communist state. Soviet propaganda depicted Stalin as all-knowing and the state as the sole source of all human happiness. The poster on the top conveys the image of a godlike Stalin looking on as his state-guided new industrial order transforms society. Yet, on the right, he was also depicted as a kind, ordinary man of the people. Even sympathetic writers in the West were taken in. But Stalin was to prove that beneath this warm image lay a man driven by fear, spite, sadism and a pure will to power.

**Illustration 3**

Hitler and Stalin used all the modern techniques of propaganda — radio, film, the press, art, photography and education — to convey a sense of the massive power of the state. Photographer Leni Reifenstahl took the photo on the left of a German athlete at the 1936 Olympics. The photo is subtle but powerful propaganda. Together, the cropping, camera angle, lighting and composition turn this athlete into a symbol of Hitler’s new German master race, ready to burst the tight constraints imposed on it by less worthy nations and races. The Soviet poster on the right portrays the communist state as a massive and unstoppable ship, drowning its puny capitalist enemies as it plows the waves toward a glorious future.

## Lesson 1 — The Rise of the Dictators

# Illustration 1



The National Archives



The National Archives

### **Discussing the Illustrations**

1. In the 20th century, several terrifying dictators came to power. They used the state to control every aspect of their people's lives, and they had a huge and destructive impact on the entire world. One of these dictators is shown here. He is in the photo on the right standing with his arm extended rigidly. Can you name him and the nation he led?
2. The photo shows Hitler in 1928 at a big rally for his political party — the National Socialist German Workers Party. By what shorter name was it known? What do you think the term “national socialism” meant to Hitler's followers?
3. After taking power in Germany in 1933, the Nazis continued to hold big rallies, such as the one shown on the left here. From both of these photos, what can you tell about Hitler and the kind of leader he was? That is, what do the photos alone show you about him, about his leadership, and about the kind of nation the Nazis wanted Germany to become?

### **Follow-up Activity**

1. **Small-group activity:** Together the two photographs shown above reveal a good deal about the nature of the Third Reich, the government Hitler set up. Your group's task is to carefully select five to ten more photos, drawings, posters, or other visuals for a bulletin board display designed to explain to young children what they most need to know about Hitler, the Nazi movement, and the Third Reich. Ask your librarian to help you locate books with photos and other visuals on the Hitler era. Do some reading on your own about Nazi Germany. Discuss the visuals you find, and choose ten images carefully with their educational value for young children in mind. Write simple explanations of each image and link them together to tell a single, easily understood story. If you can make good copies of the images, use them, along with your written explanations, to create a well-organized display.