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HISTORIANS AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

PHILIP POMPER

ABSTRACT

Historical works on Hitler and Stalin or on specific aspects of their regimes reveal how historians differ in their treatment of individual agency. Historians' practices are examined in the light of W. H. Dray's findings about historians' concepts of causation and A. Giddens's structuration theory. Marxist and revisionist historians rejected approaches that endowed Hitler and Stalin with immense power and personal control over events. Works by Isaac Deutscher, A. J. P. Taylor, and J. Arch Getty exhibit historians' methods for reducing or nullifying agential power. Robert C. Tucker's work on Stalin offers a different approach to the problem of the interaction of structure and individual agency. Allan Bullock may be correct in his view that historians are now less likely to exaggerate or underestimate either individual agency or structure when dealing with Hitler and Stalin; and Christopher Lloyd may be correct to say that historians' practices suggest a tacit acceptance of structuration theory in some form, but it does not follow that historians are now more likely to agree about the agential power of individuals. The assessment of agential power still requires interpretation, and it is doubtful that consensus about structuration theory would affect the range of interpretation very much. However, theories of cultural evolution and comparative investigation of the "selection" of political-cultural "genes" at certain historical junctures might provide a useful framework for studying how individuals like Hitler and Stalin acquire an unusual degree of power and authority.

The "age of extremes," as Eric Hobsbawm describes the "short twentieth century,"¹ has challenged the creative powers of historians invested in the idea that causes have to be proportional to effects. To attribute events that cost tens of millions of lives to the agency of a few individuals violates historians' sense of proportion, not to speak of theoretical commitments. To be sure, although by most ordinary measures, Stalin and Hitler, the most salient examples, had vast power, only the active and passive complicity of tens of millions more could account for the dramatic changes and mass victimization associated with Stalin's and Hitler's policies. In their efforts to explain the regimes of the Great Dictators, many historians, whether implicitly or explicitly, try to determine both the relative causal weight and mutual impact of individual agency and

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York, 1994). "Short twentieth century" means the period 1914–1991.

structure.² However, historians do not necessarily give the terms “agency” or “structure” a prominent position when they produce causal explanations; and when dealing with causation, as such, they tend to shun the complex philosophical discussions around it and get on with the task of assigning causes to events.³

Most professional historians tend to arrange causes under broad structural classifications: for example, economic, political, social, and cultural.⁴ They also tend to be skeptical of theories in which “great men” or “heroes” figure as significant causes. Even psychohistorians, who were suspected of reviving the Great Man approach, connected their subjects to larger contexts and historical trends, generally by way of a species of structural theory.⁵ The Marxist revival of the 1960s and 1970s, the commitment of a fresh cohort of historians to history “from below,” the proliferation of variations within the *Annales* school, and postmodernism—which shifted focus from people to texts and discourse and challenged traditional notions of causation—strengthened the tendency to reject or minimize individual agency in history.⁶

Assuming that an investigation of historians’ methods for reducing individual agency is best served by studying the historian’s equivalent of a limiting case, that of a tyrant with absolute power, the cases of Hitler and Stalin insistently offer themselves. So similar are the historiographical controversies surrounding their regimes that Allan Bullock produced parallel biographies. Surveying decades of accumulated evidence and arguments about such weighty matters as the causes of Soviet collectivization, the Great Purges of 1936–1939, the Gulag,

2. The term “structure” can be used in either a constructivist or realist sense. In their realist versions, structures embrace a great variety of things, both symbolic and material, and are shaped by a variety of architectonics. The systemic architectonic currently appears to be the dominant one in Western social science, although “system” itself does not have a single meaning and it would be wiser to speak of systemic architectonics. For an approach treating structure in terms of system, see Christopher Lloyd, *The Structures of History* (Oxford, 1993).

3. What the *Annales* school would call *histoire événementielle* is assumed here.

4. These categories probably maintain their meaning for most historians, although their relative positions change as intellectual generations shift emphasis among them.

5. Erik Erikson is the most notable figure. His works on Luther and Gandhi present them as therapists for their communities. Their genius lay in their ability to translate personal crises into ideology and ritual for communities undergoing the trauma of change and crises of identity. Bruce Mazlish combined Freud and Weber in his study of the lives of “revolutionary ascetics,” leaders whose personal characteristics served the goals of communities undergoing the travails of modernization. Fred Weinstein and Gerald Platt applied ego psychology and Parsonian sociology to modern history, connecting structural change with rearrangements of the psyche. They called their approach “psychoanalytic sociology.” In still another variation on the theme of modernization, John Demos used object-relations theory in conjunction with modernization theory in a study of witchcraft. See: Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1958) and *Gandhi’s Truth* (New York, 1969); Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic* (New York, 1976); Fred Weinstein and Gerald Platt, *The Wish to Be Free* (Berkeley, 1969); John Demos, *Entertaining Satan* (New York, 1982). For a recent evaluation of the state of psychohistory in the context of the social sciences, see Fred Weinstein, “Psychohistory and the Crisis of the Social Sciences,” *History and Theory* 34 (1995), 299–319.

6. The new histories tend to be social-scientific and structural in outlook. There is, however, an anti-structural microhistorical trend in cultural history distinct from postmodern anti-realistic disintegrative approaches. The latter critiques tend to deny an extratextual reality, something that most historians find problematic. For a recent overview of these trends see: Ignacio Olabarri, “‘New’ New History: A *Long Durée* Structure,” *History and Theory* 34 (1995), 1–29.

Nazi racial policies, World War II, and the Holocaust, Bullock concludes: "After the pendulum has swung between exaggerating and underestimating their roles, the longer perspective suggests that in both cases neither the historical circumstances nor the individual personality is sufficient explanation by itself without the other."⁷

But how did individual agency and other causes interact? It is no simple matter to establish the "micro-macro link"⁸ at any level in a complex society, but the historical interest lavished on the role of leaders in the formulation and execution of policies eases the historian's challenge of resolving distinct problems, such as the origins and conduct of World War II or the origins, scope, and character of the Great Purges of 1936–1939. Whether or not they have a theory explaining these events, historians usually situate Stalin and Hitler in various schemes of causation, in which individual agency plays a greater or lesser role.

In the absence of a survey of historians' positions on individual agency and causation, theoreticians interested in such matters find it expedient to guess about them or to examine several historical works intensively and look for common practices that suggest shared, but often unarticulated, theoretical assumptions. W. H. Dray, for example, used A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* and the controversy around it to show that both Taylor and many of his critics shared certain assumptions about the distinction between a cause and a condition.⁹ I will follow a procedure similar to Dray's to investigate what methods historians use when dealing with the problem of individual agency.

I

Although they may not define it, historians do have implicit notions of agency comparable to those spelled out in current theories. The following definition of agency draws much of its inspiration from Anthony Giddens and covers the ground reasonably well.

Agency requires that actions be *effective* in changing material or cultural conditions, that they be *intentional*, sufficiently *unconstrained* that actions are not perfectly predictable and that the actor possesses the ability to observe the consequences of an action and to be *reflexive* in evaluating them.¹⁰

7. Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin, Parallel Lives* (New York, 1993), 973.

8. This is the title of a collection dedicated to such problems as the interaction of agency and social structure. *The Micro-Macro Link*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander *et al.* (Berkeley, 1987). To give some sense of the complexity of the general problem, two contributors to the collection (Richard Münch and Neil J. Smelser) in an overview noted that "micro" and "macro" had been used to denote at least seven types of relationships, and "micro" might refer to individuals.

9. W. H. Dray, "Concepts of Causation in A. J. P. Taylor's Account of the Origins of the Second World War," *History and Theory* 17 (1978), 149–174. Hereinafter cited as "Concepts of Causation."

10. T. Dietz and T. R. Burns, "Human Agency and the Evolutionary Dynamics of Culture," *Acta Sociologica* 35 (1992), 194.

This definition not only reflects current “structurationist”¹¹ thinking in sociology, but, with a slight gloss, embraces historians’ concepts of causation inferred by W. H. Dray from the controversy over Taylor’s book. According to Dray’s “paradigms” of causation, in order to be causes of events, individuals’ actions must force¹² an actual change in the normal course of events, that is, they must be *effective*; individuals must *intend*¹³ that the change in the normal course of events¹⁴ follows from their actions; they must willfully, actively, and rationally pursue their ends rather than react to the initiative of others or to conditions forcing them to act in a certain way,¹⁵ that is, they must be sufficiently *unconstrained* and *reflexive*.

Dray contrasts the above paradigms of causation with a fourth one, in which historical conditions are themselves sufficient to cause the events in question. The fourth paradigm suggests structural causes of such magnitude that they stifle the freedom of individual actors. Moreover, some structural explanations cancel not only individual but collective agency. The historian who chooses the fourth paradigm of causal explanation evidently believes that one can perform a thought experiment that concludes that no imagined substitute actors could cause outcomes different from those effected by the real actors. Finally, Dray notes that sometimes a historian simultaneously holds incompatible notions of “profound” structural causes working at one “level” and agency operating at some other level of explanation.¹⁶ However, what seems like incompatibility to Dray may be a symptom of an approach that tacitly assumes complex interactions between agency and structure.

Going over some of the same ground that Dray did with Taylor in somewhat different terms, and comparing Taylor with historians dealing with similar problems suggests that the incompatibility is more apparent than real. The examples adduced below show that historians shape individual agents and historical “space” in keeping with their own historiographical designs. For example, in recent decades radial metaphors for historical space (center-margin or core-periphery) have joined the more traditional vertical ones of higher and lower levels or strata. Such metaphors of course poorly represent the historical space in which individuals act. Be that as it may, historians commonly use spatial metaphors for their own purposes. They also often have in mind a hierarchy of causes.¹⁷

Structural causes can be ranked from macro to relatively micro ones. Like officers in a command structure, causes can be controlling at one level, and

11. Structuration theory will be discussed in section V.

12. Dray, “Concepts of Causation,” 163.

13. *Ibid.*, 152.

14. *Ibid.*, 160.

15. *Ibid.*, 163.

16. *Ibid.*, 170–172.

17. E. H. Carr, for example, took this position in “Causation in History,” chapter four of *What Is History?* (New York, 1961), 117. Carr probably represented the views of a great many historians in this, if not in other aspects of his work.

instrumental at another. An individual can be an agent when facing in one “direction” and be deprived of agency when facing in another. Moreover, what happens at any given locus may be crucial for causing a given micro- or middle-range event, but many such events and their causes in turn may be implicitly sublated within an emergent macrostructural scheme of things. Perhaps unarticulated assumptions of this sort rather than confusion lie behind the apparent incompatibility (seen by Dray) between structure and agency as causes in historians’ explanations. In any case, despite significant differences among them, the historians to be examined here found similar ways to reduce or nullify the individual agency of leaders who, to all appearances, had a great deal of power.

Using Isaac Deutscher’s *Stalin, a Political Biography* (1949), A. J. P. Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961), and J. Arch Getty’s *Origins of the Great Purges* (1985), I will focus on the methods deployed by three historians to reduce Stalin’s individual agency in collectivization and the Great Purges and Hitler’s in World War II. These historians use quite similar methods to nullify or reduce to insignificance individual agency, even though their theoretical frameworks (explicit or implicit) differ widely. Taylor described himself as a plain narrative historian,¹⁸ Deutscher as a Marxist,¹⁹ and Getty as a positivist.²⁰ All three were aware that their works had serious implications, whether for the Cold War or for more narrowly professional struggles over explanations of important events.²¹

Deutscher ostensibly wrote biography, Taylor diplomatic history, and Getty political-organizational history; but under the guise of political biography Deutscher really wrote about the tragic course of revolutions. Deutscher’s Stalin acquired some of the tragic grandeur of the larger historical dialectic, until the

18. Taylor’s biographer pictures him as a person unwilling to say much about his debt to mentors or to theories, and inconsistent in his statements about historical causation. Although quite willing to offer general statements about his subject, Taylor didn’t feel compelled to support them with anything but historical knowledge and empirical research. He said of himself: “I am not a philosophic historian. I have no system, no moral interpretation. . . . I try to judge from the evidence without being influenced by the judgment of others. I have little respect for men in positions of power, though no doubt I should not do better in their place.” Quoted in: Robert Cole, *A. J. P. Taylor, the Traitor within the Gates* (New York, 1993).

19. Deutscher’s Marxism is well known. For a good collection of essays on him, see *Isaac Deutscher, the Man and His Work*, ed. David Horowitz (London, 1971). Although like most Marxists Deutscher tended to present leaders like Lenin and Stalin as either retardants or accelerants in a process of progressive change, he did make a strenuous effort to study the minds of his subjects, to connect personality with revolutionism and styles of leadership.

20. “State Society, and Superstition,” *Russian Review* 46 (1987), 395. It should be noted that Getty’s work is neither as distinguished nor as widely known as either Deutscher’s or Taylor’s. Getty appears here as an exemplar of the methods historians use for reducing individual agency rather than as an outstanding historian.

21. The first two, born roughly a year apart (Deutscher in 1907 and Taylor in 1906) and writing for English publications, knew each other’s work. Deutscher criticized Taylor’s book, *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961), in the *Times Literary Supplement*. (Deutscher, “Letter to the Editor,” *Times Literary Supplement* [June 2, 1961], 361.) Getty (born in 1950), writing long after Deutscher had departed the scene, criticized Deutscher’s *Stalin, a Political Biography* (New York, 1949) in *Origins of the Great Purges* (New York, 1985), 2–3.

very end of the story, when Stalin and the dialectic parted company.²² Taylor's Hitler, on the other hand, behaved like a normal (though extremely "wicked") politician, not only in the immediate context of the diplomatic maneuvers preceding the outbreak of World War II, but when seen against the larger background of international politics. Taylor, who had no love of politicians in general, commented on the folly of international politics. He did not offer a macro theory about the inevitability of war comparable to Deutscher's theses about the ineluctable processes of revolution. Quite the contrary, for Taylor the mistakes and blunders of a handful of men rather than profound causes produced World War II. Getty presents Stalin as the most "authoritative" actor in a setting of organizational chaos, in which no one had a systematic plan or really controlled outcomes. Like Taylor's Hitler, Getty's Stalin is a normal, though powerful, politician.²³

The three authors reduce their subjects' individual agency in the following ways: 1) *depersonalizing* leaders by effacing their individuality and presenting them as personifications of groups or typical products of structural forces, and as normal, ordinary, and familiar rather than demonic or pathological; 2) *instrumentalizing* them by making them appendages of groups and larger historical trends and continuators of past culture; 3) *removing intent* by making them passive or reactive rather than initiatory, and by denying conscious, rational, and systematic planning or preparation; 4) *restricting freedom* by denying them means to achieve their ends and control over the course of events; 5) *narrowing the picture* to a given event or events; 6) *expanding the picture* to include larger structures and processes.

Depersonalization

Depersonalization's main function is to divest the subject of unique features. Using theoretically informed or ad hoc sociology, the historians under review identify the groups that teach subjects roles and give them rules to obey. Depersonalization has an anthropological dimension as well, in that subjects share the values, symbols, and interpretive schemes of groups. The picture can be quite complex, for individuals are shaped and reshaped at several "levels" or at a variety of locations in the changing sociocultural space through which they move. Resourceful biographers know how to connect their subjects to a variety of groups and structures at different locations at different moments. In short, historians assume and depict a complex and ongoing process of socialization

22. Deutscher was forced to add chapter XV, "Postscript: Stalin's Last Years" in 1966. In it he noted: "He was unable to adjust himself to the mid-century Russia, the Russia that had, partly despite him but partly under his inspiration, industrialized herself, modernized her social structure, and educated her masses. . . . In order to go on civilizing herself, Russia now had to drive out Stalinism." Deutscher, *Stalin, a Political Biography*, 2d ed. (New York, 1967), 624, 626. Later references are to the second edition.

23. Given the title of Getty's book, one wonders about Taylor's direct influence; however, Getty cites not Taylor, but Martin Broszat, whose Hitler "practiced no direct and systematic leadership but from time to time jolted the government or Party into action . . ." (Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 222, n. 18.) Getty's Stalin acted similarly.

and enculturation, and when referring to a specific action or event, they reduce their subjects' agency by positing their ordinariness or typicality. The subject acts as a member of a group or groups rather than as an individual agent.

A comparative approach sometimes provides the theoretical basis for depersonalization. For example, subjects may be depicted as products of structural pressures peculiar to revolutions. The pressures presumably mold individuals situated at certain locations in a standard revolutionary process into typical shapes; subjects may be forced to act not only against their will, but against the very groups into which they were socialized and enculturated. Thus, a "higher" structural level with greater causal force may cancel or override "lower" levels of causation. Whether or not such major forces come into play, historians can in any case emphasize the subject's determinate aspects at a variety of social and cultural locations.

Instrumentalization

Instrumentalization takes depersonalization one step further by making subjects tools of group projects or cultural tendencies. Subjects are described not only as bearing the mentalities of groups, but as either consciously or unconsciously acting in their interests. Instrumentalization plays a major role in theories of progress. Historians using such theories (for example, Marxian or modernization theory) may presume to know both the direction of history and the proper vehicles of historical change. The historian subsumes the subject under the vehicle, perhaps a collective agent. Even the latter may be denied agency and made a product of even larger structural causes.²⁴ Subjects may be seen as instruments of either historical change (progress, modernization) or continuity (backwardness, tradition). The idea of "political culture," for example, may be brought into play in order to render subjects continuators of tradition. In complex works, individuals are seen as "uneven" products, as conflicted, as instruments of both past and future, or as protean. In any case, subjects remain instrumental to other causes, whether micro or macro, and do not possess individual agency.

Removing Intent

Historians sometimes play the role of lawyers for the defense when discussing a subject's responsibility for an event, and they may expend much effort denying intent. Unlike depersonalization and instrumentalization, which depend upon some sort of sociology or anthropology or metaphysical perspective, issues of intentionality often revolve around evidence specific to an event. As evidence for lack of intent, historians may adduce the absence of rational planning and preparation; they may point to the passivity or reactivity of the subject. Even when there is evidence of planning, historians may try to show that events somehow swept their subjects along or forced their hand; they may suggest a

24. This, for example, is Theda Skocpol's approach in *States and Social Revolutions* (New York, 1979).

reduced level of consciousness; they may even read minds and aver that subjects did not mean what they said.

Restricting Freedom

Most definitions of agency call for freedom both to choose a course of action and rationally select means to achieve an end. The subject may be volitional, rational, and intentional, but still not have control over the means to achieve a chosen end. The historian here asserts that even if the potential for the exercise of individual agency exists in principle, particular historical circumstances sharply reduced individuals' freedom to act, for example, by not giving them the means to pursue a chosen end.

Narrowing the Picture

This is a narrative technique and also resembles a legal maneuver. Historians create a believable defense by focusing upon a narrow range of evidence, or a very temporally limited space. They isolate an event and exclude evidence of a longstanding intention or plan. They admit into court only evidence specific to a given event. Earlier or later actions and stated intentions cannot be used to establish intent with respect to the event in question. In other words, the subject might be seen as capable of wanting a certain outcome or of acting in a certain way, but the historian denies that such motivation for the event in question existed. The subject's actions at one moment cannot be used to establish motivation at another moment.

Expanding the Picture

Finally, one may use theory to shape an event into a typical product of long-term forces and structures. Like the depersonalization of an individual, the typification of an event in a comparative transhistorical framework (for example, spanning centuries and comparing different events of the same type, as constructed by theory) deprives it of its uniqueness. The individual actors (and perhaps collectivities as well) associated with events in this sort of comparative framework tend to disappear in historical space or are simply ignored. One might substitute others for the given actors, yet something similar would happen.²⁵ This is Dray's fourth paradigm of causation with a vengeance.

25. Trotsky provided one of the most striking illustrations of this with respect to individual agency. He wrote: "Some professional psychologist ought to draw up an anthology of the parallel expressions of Nicholas [II] and Louis [XVI], Alexandra, and Antoinette, and their courtiers. There would be no lack of material, and the result would be a highly instructive historic testimony in favor of the materialist psychology. Similar (of course, far from identical) irritations in similar conditions call out similar reflexes; the more powerful the irritation, the sooner it overcomes personal peculiarities. To a tickle, people react differently, but to a red-hot iron, alike. As a steam-hammer converts a sphere and a cube alike into sheet metal, so under the blow of too great and inexorable events resistances are smashed and the boundaries of 'individuality' lost." *The History of the Russian Revolution*, transl. Max Eastman, 3 vols. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1932), I, 93.

II

Illustrations: Deutscher

Deutscher represents a grand tradition of historiography that one can trace to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. Deutscher depersonalizes Stalin by classifying him under several groups. Stalin, whose father had become a city-dweller and cobbler and who himself had entered a Greek Orthodox seminary in Tbilisi, "was the son of ex-serfs, and though he was now working to change the life of a whole people, he had inherited something of the peasant-like immobility and inertia, from fear of change."²⁶ Also, given his origins and his revolutionary work in Baku, Stalin belonged to the "eastern strand in Bolshevism," which to Deutscher signified a provincial and anti-Western outlook.²⁷ Later, "the primitive provinces took their revenge. . . . Their spiritual climate became, in a sense, decisive for the country's outlook. . . . Stalin . . . was also well suited to orientalize his party."²⁸

Deutscher is at pains precisely to locate Stalin within the increasingly complex world of the professional revolutionary. In organizational terms, Stalin belonged to the *praktiki*, a subdivision of the Russian revolutionary subculture and, more particularly, of the Bolshevik underground organized by the *komitet-chiki*, the committeemen. Stalin became a machine politician, a man of the *apparat* rather than a *teoretik* like Lenin. After the civil war the committeemen took over: "Those who handled the levers of the machine and were most intimately associated with it . . . became the leaders of the new era. The administrator began to elbow out the ideologue, the bureaucrat and committee-man eliminated the idealist. Who could be favoured by this evolution and who could favour it more strongly than Stalin, the committee-man *par excellence*, the committee-man writ large?"²⁹ After Lenin's incapacitation in 1922 Stalin merely tinkered with the political gadgetry he inherited. As the machine grew, he became its instrument. "His own behaviour was now dictated by the moods, needs, and pressures of the vast political machine."³⁰

By making Stalin dictated to rather than dictating, Deutscher significantly shapes his image as an agent. Stalin plays the political game according to rules of the *apparat*, which evolved with the revolution. When Stalin erred in the direction of over-centralization, "he reflected the drift of ideas, moods, and aspirations in the Russian civil service, as it had been recast and remoulded after the revolution."³¹ Stalin and Bolshevik *apparatchiki* learned the methods of Tsarist bureaucrats. They promoted the traditional idea of "a 'great and

26. Deutscher, *Stalin, a Political Biography*, 23.

27. *Ibid.*, 208–220.

28. *Ibid.*, 229–230.

29. *Ibid.*, 226–227.

30. *Ibid.*, 235.

31. *Ibid.*, 241.

indivisible' Russia."³² "He [Stalin] registered its [the new bureaucracy's] contradictory moods with an almost seismographic sensitivity. . . . his own bent and bias concurred with the much wider, impersonal pressures that were making themselves felt in the state."³³ "The remarkable trait in Stalin was his unique sensibility to . . . the psychological undercurrents in and around the party . . . of which he set himself up as a mouthpiece."³⁴

Deutscher's Stalin and his comrades were thus burdened with loyalties, antipathies, habits of mind and expression, political ideas, moods, and desires that had nothing to do with their official doctrine and original revolutionary intentions. All of this diminished both Stalin's individual agency and the Party's collective agency. Deutscher goes to great lengths to render Stalin grey, ordinary, and obscure between 1922 and 1929, when he was maneuvering for power: "What was striking in the General Secretary was that there was nothing striking about him. His almost impersonal personality seemed to be the ideal vehicle for the anonymous forces of class and party."³⁵ Adhering to a thesis one finds in Trotsky's biography of Stalin, Deutscher depicts Stalin as a fence-sitter in politics. In a tortured analysis, Deutscher portrays Stalin both as a "man of the golden mean" and someone averse to compromise: "He personified the dictatorship of the golden mean over all the unruly ideas and doctrines that emerged in post-revolutionary society, the dictatorship of the golden mean that could not remain true to itself, to the golden mean."³⁶ In Deutscher's terms, Stalin's "mind" was in conflict with his "temperament," which deplored compromise, and this accounted for Stalin's need to annihilate "those who seemed to walk to the right or left of him."³⁷

In Deutscher's overall analysis, however, Stalin's mind counts for little compared to the vast structural force of revolution. The revolutionary earthquake prompted Stalin's "violent jumps now to this now to that extreme of the road. . . . His periodic sharp turns are the convulsive attempts of the man of the golden mean to keep his balance amid the cataclysms of his time. . . . Revolutions are as a rule intolerant of golden means and 'common sense'."³⁸ Just in order to survive, Stalin had no choice but to leap from the middle of the road.

Deutscher depicts a passive or reactive Stalin during collectivization. "As things stood, Stalin acted under the overwhelming pressure of events. The circumstance that he was not prepared for the events precipitated him into a course of action over which he was liable to lose control."³⁹ But as the process of collectivization progressed, "about the middle of 1929 Stalin was carried

32. *Ibid.*, 242–243.

33. *Ibid.*, 243.

34. *Ibid.*, 292.

35. *Ibid.*, 273.

36. *Ibid.*, 296–297.

37. *Ibid.*, 296. The concept of "mind" is spacious enough to accommodate "temperament" for many students of psychology. Deutscher seems to use "mind" to denote a cognitive apparatus distinct from emotions, although it is not easy to know what he means.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 318.

away by the momentum of the movement. . . . He was . . . completely possessed . . . He seemed to live in a half-real and half-dreamy world of statistical figures . . . in which no target and no objective seemed to be beyond his and the party's grasp."⁴⁰ These images suggest that Stalin was not fully conscious, not rational. Deutscher uses the passive voice to portray Stalin as a product of forces too great for him. A passive Stalin was similarly "impelled" to pursue a feverish pace in industry.⁴¹

In a vision of events not governed by any person's reason or conscious planning, Deutscher pictures tens of millions of people moving trance-like, as if deranged or in a dream.

The whole experiment seemed to be a piece of prodigious insanity, in which all rules of logic and principles of economics were turned upside down. It was as if a whole nation had suddenly abandoned and destroyed its houses and huts, which, though obsolete and decaying, existed in reality, and moved, lock, stock, and barrel, into some illusory buildings, for which not more than a hint of scaffolding had in reality been prepared. . . . Imagine that that nation numbered 160 million people; and that it was lured, prodded, whipped, and shepherded into that surrealistic enterprise by an ordinary, prosaic, fairly sober man, whose mind had suddenly become possessed by a half-real and half-somnambulistic vision . . .⁴²

Deutscher has prepared us for this scene by restricting Stalin's and the Party's freedom to act, and by creating conflicts and pressures that their minds cannot manage. Neither individual nor collective agents, but great structural forces governed collectivization. Deutscher expands the picture by invoking Macaulay's portrait of Cromwell, whose Puritan dictatorship resembled that of Stalin's Bolsheviks.⁴³ The implication is that similar structural forces produce similar actions.

Moreover, Deutscher expands the comparative framework to include England's industrial revolution. Stalin's actions can be understood only by way of a theory of uneven historical development, in which Russia must make good by revolutionary means and in one great leap several centuries of backwardness. It must suffer in its own way the pain that England had experienced during "primitive" capital accumulation. Thus, "the historian cannot be seriously surprised if he finds in [Stalin] traits associated with tyrants of earlier centuries."⁴⁴ In the greater scheme of things, Stalin's actions, however cruel, represent the inexorable forces of progress.

When Deutscher moves to the Great Purges, he deploys his full array of methods for reducing individual and collective agency (depersonalization, instrumentalization, restricting freedom, removing intent, expanding the picture). He sets the stage by describing the Jacobin Terror of 1793–1794. In the following passage Deutscher combines instrumentalization (acting at the behest of larger

40. *Ibid.*, 321–324.

41. *Ibid.*, 325.

42. *Ibid.*, 326.

43. *Ibid.*, 327.

44. *Ibid.*, 343.

rational forces) with irrationality (lack of intent and reflexivity) and lack of freedom (history had written the script): "Leaders and followers, factions and individuals, all seemed to perform their historical function, that of undoing feudal France, and to exhaust themselves to death in a single fit of delirium."⁴⁵ Deutscher's descriptions of the French revolutionary terror suggest that such strange states of mind and cruel actions should not be unexpected in revolutionary Russia, that revolutions inevitably devour their children. The Great Purges, though delayed, descend with unprecedented ferocity. Soon, however, Deutscher moves from structural analogies with eighteenth-century France to those with nineteenth-century Russia.

Stalin began to act less like Robespierre than like Russian Tsars facing revolutionary terrorists. In all respects, Stalin and the Party responded to structural imperatives. In Deutscher's tour de force of narrative macrostructural analysis, Stalin's individuality and agency succumb to the pressure of history and to the combined structural imperatives of progress and traditional Russian political culture:

The past took a cruel revenge upon a generation that was making a heroic effort to get away from it; and that revenge reached its climax precisely in the course of the second [Stalinist] revolution. The paradox of Russian history became embodied in Stalin. More than anybody else he represented those "responsible Communist administrators" whose "culture" was still inferior to that of Russia's old rulers, and whose overwhelming inclination it was therefore to imitate, often unknowingly, the old rulers' customs and habits. This, historically inevitable, process was reflected in the changing expressions of Stalin's own political physiognomy: the features of not one but of several great Tsars seemed to revive in the Georgian Bolshevik who now ruled from their Kremlin. . . . Now, in the period of great purges, as he suppressed his opponents, he more and more resembled Ivan the Terrible raging against the *boyars*. . . . Yet in Stalin the revolutionary elements . . . combined strangely with the traditional ones . . . The past did not efface the revolution. It rather imprinted its own pattern on a new social substance. Like Cromwell as Lord Protector or Napoleon as Emperor, Stalin now remained the guardian and the trustee of the revolution.⁴⁶

In his "Postscript: Stalin's Last Years" Deutscher recognizes that the dictator had ceased to be progressive: "In order to go on civilizing herself, Russia now had to drive out Stalinism . . . history may yet have to cleanse and reshape Stalin's work as sternly as it once cleansed and shaped the work of the English Revolution after Cromwell and of the French after Napoleon."⁴⁷ Since Deutscher's death in 1967, the cleansing and reshaping of the October Revolution and Stalinism have taken forms that he might have found surprising.

III

Taylor

An accomplished if controversial historian, A. J. P. Taylor had a certain antipathy for theory and preferred to make epigrammatic pronouncements derived

45. *Ibid.*, 346.

46. *Ibid.*, 360–361.

47. *Ibid.*, 628–629.

from his deep study of political history. For our purposes, the following is most germane: "As a historian, I recognize that Powers will be Powers."⁴⁸ It follows that the chief politicians of great powers behave in certain typical ways; and that moralizing about their actions is fruitless.⁴⁹ Taylor proclaims the Great Dictators less aberrant than the literature portrays them; he domesticates them, so to speak, by bringing them closer to the normal and familiar.

Academic ingenuity has discovered in these pronouncements [Hitler's imperial ambition and doctrine of universal destruction] the disciple of Nietzsche, the geopolitician, or the emulator of Attila. I hear in them only the generalizations of a powerful, but unstructured, intellect; dogmas which echo the conversation of any Austrian café or German beer-house.⁵⁰

The rhetoric of the dictators was no worse than the "sabre-rattling" of the old monarchs; nor, for that matter, than what English public-school boys were taught in Victorian days.⁵¹

Hitler and Mussolini were not driven on by economic motives. Like most statesmen, they had an appetite for success. They differed from others only in that their appetite was greater; and they fed it by more unscrupulous means.⁵²

Taylor recognizes individual agency in history and indeed, makes it quite clear that in domestic policy Hitler had acted with agential power. Yet in foreign policy, he remained typical:

Hitler broke the artificial bonds which had been designed to tie him and gradually became an all-powerful dictator — though more gradually than the legend makes out. He changed most things in Germany. He destroyed political freedom and the rule of law; he transformed German economics and finance; he quarreled with the Churches; he abolished the separate states and made Germany for the first time a united country. In one sphere alone he changed nothing. His foreign policy was that of his predecessors, of the professional diplomats at the foreign ministry, and indeed of virtually all Germans.⁵³

In order to make his case, Taylor segregates Hitler's *modus operandi* as a domestic politician from his actions in foreign policy. To reduce Hitler's agency he narrows the picture, denying that Hitler's actions in domestic policy can be used as evidence for abnormality in foreign policy. Not even the Holocaust, which is not easily classified as domestic policy, is permitted as evidence. Taylor argues that in the Holocaust Hitler merely actualized what most Germans believed in and wished for, but did not act upon: "Everything which Hitler did against the Jews followed logically from the racial doctrines in which most Germans vaguely believed. It was the same with foreign policy. Not many Germans really cared passionately and persistently whether Germany again

48. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2d ed. (Greenwich, Conn., 1965), 279. Hereafter cited as *Origins*.

49. Taylor has been accused of many things, but not consistency. Dray and others take him to task for injecting his own moral judgments into the picture. See Dray, "Concepts of Causation," 166–169.

50. Taylor, *Origins*, 71.

51. *Ibid.*, 102.

52. *Ibid.*, 105.

53. *Ibid.*, 70.

dominated Europe. But they talked as if they did. Hitler took them at their word. He made the Germans live up to their professions, or down to them—much to their regret.”⁵⁴ By taking each policy separately, but finding a domestic source for each, Taylor tries strenuously to make Hitler an ordinary German and a traditional German statesman.

On the other hand, when examining Hitler’s foreign policy, Taylor also expands the picture to include the behavior of great powers throughout history. Thus Hitler’s ambition to make Germany the dominant power in Europe remained unremarkable, not only for a German politician but for a politician playing the great-power game. Taylor ends ambiguously: “He aimed to make Germany the dominant Power in Europe and maybe, more remotely, in the world. Other Powers have pursued similar aims, and still do. . . . In international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German.”⁵⁵

Like Deutscher, Taylor tends to reduce agency by diminishing his subject’s intentionality and consciousness, and by making Hitler passive and reactive rather than initiatory in the process leading to the outbreak of World War II. He does not say that Hitler’s foreign policy designs were generally irrational; nor that Hitler or other statesmen were abnormal. Rather, he argues that to be successful diplomats need not have precise plans. They are at their best when, like Hitler, they respond flexibly to opportunities. Taylor uses a generalization to explain Hitler’s success: “The greatest masters of statecraft are those who do not know what they are doing.”⁵⁶ Hitler’s inaction, his lack of a precise plan in the specific context of 1938–1939, thus deprived him of agential power without making him ineffective. By narrowing the picture to an immediate context, Taylor manages to sustain his larger aim, to show Hitler as succeeding because his opponents made mistakes in the game of power.

Taylor’s account of the events leading to the Anschluss with Austria reduces Hitler’s individual agency by removing intentionality. Hitler’s actions are precipitated by others, as if he were a dancer being led by his partner. “Hitler responded [to Schuschnigg] as though someone had trodden on a painful corn.”⁵⁷ Hitler had not wanted to seize Austria; he had not planned the invasion long in advance as a step in the domination of Europe. Rather, the crisis was provoked by Schuschnigg. “Everything was improvised in a couple of days—policy, promises, armed force. . . . By the Anschluss—or rather by the way in which it was accomplished—Hitler took the first step in the policy which was to brand him as the greatest of war criminals. Yet he took this step unintentionally. Indeed he did not know that he had taken it.”⁵⁸

Although denying that Hitler had any systematic plan, Taylor does grudgingly admit that Hitler entertained grand designs “in his spare time,” but only as

54. *Ibid.*, 72.

55. *Ibid.*, 293.

56. *Ibid.*, 73.

57. *Ibid.*, 143.

58. *Ibid.*, 146.

“day-dreams.” “Chaplin grasped this, with an artist’s genius, when he showed the Great Dictator transforming the world into a toy balloon and kicking it to the ceiling with the point of his toe.”⁵⁹ With this comic image Taylor both diminishes the seriousness of Hitler’s purpose and suggests that the dreams would have remained merely dreams, had not others precipitated Hitler into action. One can compare this to Deutscher’s less egregious but functionally similar picture of Stalin as a somnambulist during collectivization. Taylor refers to day-dreaming again when confronting the Hossbach memorandum (recording a conference held in November 1937), which many historians read as conclusive evidence of Hitler’s ambitions. “Hitler’s exposition was in large part day-dreaming, unrelated to what followed in real life.” Repeatedly, Taylor uses dream-like states of mind, vagueness, significant discrepancies between plans and outcomes, or the weaknesses of a plan, to reduce intentionality and thereby, agency. But Taylor also believes that a somnambulist can go far in politics. With respect to post-1935 developments he writes: “Henceforth he would advance with the certainty of a sleep-walker.”⁶⁰ Hitler’s opportunism and sleep-walking thus won out, at least for a time, because those with genuine agential power – the statesmen of England and France – blundered badly.

IV

Getty

Deutscher and Taylor, despite great differences in style and perspective, thus tend to use similar methods which reduce Stalin’s and Hitler’s agency in such momentous events as collectivization, the Great Purges, and World War II. Getty belongs to a younger generation of historians who deploy these methods rather differently. The revisionists or “new cohort” (they date their movement to the 1970s) took pains to examine sometimes chaotic processes in the society as well as the state by practicing history from below, by bringing into the picture hitherto neglected middle-level institutions and grassroots processes. Their works often read like research reports, and the revisionists’ research methods bolster their claim that they are rectifying not only the theoretical onesidedness, but the limited archival work of the proponents of the “totalitarian school” who, the revisionists claim, relied instead on the models of political scientists and philosophers.⁶¹ In some respects the revisionist interpreters of Stalinism

59. *Ibid.*, 70.

60. *Ibid.*, 87.

61. The following is a paraphrase of the classic version of the totalitarian model set forth in Carl Friedrich’s five points: 1) an official ideology that tends to be both totalistic and eschatological; 2) a single, well organized, hierarchical party machine, with a ruling clique and supreme leader, who control the bureaucracies, and a mass party consisting of up to ten per cent of the population; 3) a virtual monopoly of the modern technology of war; 4) a virtual monopoly of the modern means of communication and the media; 5) state terror and control with campaigns exercised through (3) and (4), and directed against “enemies,” real or invented. Friedrich’s formulation can be found in Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism, the Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995), 125–126.

Revisionists find that rather than organizing and systematically controlling smoothly functioning

resemble the German historians of Hitler and Nazism who attacked the “intentionalists.”⁶² The resemblance is not accidental; revisionists were well aware of the German “structuralists” (more commonly known as “functionalists”) work.⁶³

The revisionists appear to have had an overall program of presenting the Soviet Union in less sinister terms than their Cold-Warrior predecessors had. They wanted to “de-demonize” it for Western readers by removing the stigma of totalitarianism and finding less frightening terms to describe Soviet institutions. In this the revisionists differ from Deutscher, who, despite his effort to normalize the Soviet Union within a spacious comparative perspective, called the Stalin era “totalitarian.” However, like Deutscher, the revisionists make revolutionary processes the causal center of their analysis, thus resembling a group of contemporary historians who took great pains to show that the October Revolution was not a coup organized by a small, machine-like Party controlled by Lenin. Rather, both groups pictured the leaders as being pushed from “below” by radical constituencies.⁶⁴

Historians who emphasize the power of the top leaders are regarded by revisionists as representatives of the Cold War historiography of the “totalitarian school.”⁶⁵ The revisionists study lower-level party structures, processes of social change unleashed by the revolution, and the participation of masses of people in historical change. Rather than denying human agency and attributing change to vast structural forces, they see agency operating in relatively chaotic situations, in which new institutions function badly as a setting for putatively totalitarian power. Leaders have to adapt themselves to sometimes chaotic forces operating from below. For revisionists, the Communist monolith, a machine operated by Lenin and Stalin and overriding all resistance, never existed.

Like Taylor, the revisionists depict the leaders as ordinary people rather than monsters, emphasize their improvisation, their lack of a grand design or precise intent to bring about anything like the Great Purges, as well as their inability

political machines, the dictators and the “center” could not and even chose not to exercise systematic control. Although not without agential power, the leaders exerted it only episodically and reactively. Like Marxists, when revisionists feel compelled to admit individual agency into the picture as a significant cause, they tend to see it as an accelerant, retardant, or catalyst for institutional and social change. Arguments for and against the revisionists of Stalinism can be found in: *The Russian Review* 45 (1986), 357–413; *The Russian Review* 46 (1987), 379–431; *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath*, ed. Nick Lampert and Gabor Rittersporn (Armonk, N.Y., 1992); and *Stalinist Terror*, ed. J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (New York, 1993).

62. One such historian, Geoff Eley, felt that the revisionists had gone too far in their rejection of politics as a cause (that is, the politics of the “top” or “center”). He recognized their resemblances to Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat, the “structuralist” revisionists of the traditional view of Hitler’s central role. Although himself a critic of the totalitarian model, Eley warned the revisionists of Stalinism not to abandon too hastily the insights of its proponents. Eley, “History with the Politics Left Out—Again?” *The Russian Review* 45 (1986), 385–394.

63. See, for example, Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 6 and 222 n. 18.

64. For a review of the historiography of the October Revolution that contains an account of revisionism in this area, see Edward Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1990).

65. For a good review of the entire trend, see Gleason, *Totalitarianism, the Inner History of the Cold War*.

to implement whatever plans they had. Like Taylor, who cropped the picture in order to restrict Hitler's agency, Getty provoked the protests of colleagues by emphasizing the initial bureaucratic stages of the process rather than the massive loss of life under Stalinist terror. One outraged critic wrote of Getty's *Origins of the Great Purges*:

The very title of this book naturally leads one to expect an explanation for one of the bloodiest terrors in history. It soon turns out, however, that for Getty the purges meant above all a revision of the Party rolls. He points out correctly but irrelevantly that in Russian the word, "purge," *chistka*, did not mean anything particularly sinister. He then proceeds to devote far more space to the 1935 exchange of Party cards than to mass murder. . . . His choice of subject matter reminds one of a historian who chooses to write an account of a shoe factory operating in the death-camp of Auschwitz.⁶⁶

Getty, like Taylor, although more tentatively, emphasizes Stalin's lack of a plan when describing the events of 1936:

Indeed, the hypothetical existence of such a master plan [for a campaign against enemies of the people] is not implied by the available evidence and is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain the political events of 1936.

Stalin may have preferred to postpone decisions. This is not to say that he was a "prisoner of the Kremlin," that he was the tool of others, or that he was ignorant of developments. But the evidence does imply that he may have often been reacting to events as much as initiating them. . . . Like all skillful politicians, he preferred to keep his options open.⁶⁷

Getty does give Stalin agential power, although greatly diminished. Instead of the bloodthirsty tyrant with a paranoid streak depicted by Stalin biographers, Getty's Stalin is an astute manipulator, a "political makeweight," trying to achieve his goals of party renewal by methods less drastic than massive terror.⁶⁸ Like Deutscher, Getty sees structural forces behind the Great Purges—not the vast, tragic processes of revolution overriding the intentions of the leaders, but grassroots processes working conjointly with the policies of the leaders and not completely under their control. The policies reflect the bureaucratic struggles between center and periphery and between radicals and moderates, struggles which Stalin sometimes manipulated but could not, in the end, control.

Like Deutscher, but without his literary flair, Getty expands the picture and offers as comparisons with the 1930s in the Soviet Union not only the chaos of Hitler's polycratic system, but also Mao Zedong's loss of control over the Chinese Cultural Revolution.⁶⁹ Like Taylor ("Powers will be Powers") Getty has a lapidary phrase to cover all cases: "Political violence has a logic and momentum of its own."⁷⁰ To be sure, Getty's history does take into account both center and periphery, both leading figures and grassroots organizations,

66. Peter Kenez, "Stalinism as Humdrum Politics," *The Russian Review* 45 (1986), 398–399.

67. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 135.

68. *Ibid.*, 148–149.

69. *Ibid.*, 195.

70. *Ibid.*, 136.

both agency and structure.⁷¹ A combination of factors—personal ambitions and grudges, fear and revolutionary zealotry, badly functioning institutions and confused practices—produced in the aggregate an unintended but not wholly unexpected outcome. Unlike Deutscher, Getty does not interpret the events as part of a larger, rational structure of historical development.

Getty prefers to depersonalize and to diminish intent rather than to instrumentalize Stalin. His Stalin shifts his position, is politically indistinct, and has neither a master plan nor control over events. In presenting this portrait, Getty invokes Trotsky, who, of course, had also inspired Deutscher in many respects: “Stalin is the personification of the bureaucracy. That is the substance of the political personality.”⁷² In a later work, Getty uses Hannah Arendt’s notion of “the banality of evil” (ironic, in view of Arendt’s sponsorship of the model of totalitarianism) in trying to cut Stalin down to the size of an Eichmann.⁷³ Getty, to be sure, does note in passing that Stalin used events to achieve personal goals and that Stalin’s balancing act somehow kept him in power. It must be emphasized, however, that Getty’s multi-level, multivariate approach, like that of other revisionists, diminishes Stalin’s individual agency:

It is not necessary for us to put Stalin in day-to-day control of events to judge him. A chaotic local bureaucracy, a quasi-feudal network of politicians accustomed to arresting people, and a set of perhaps insoluble political and social problems created an atmosphere conducive to violence. All it took from Stalin were catalytic and probably ad hoc interventions at three pivotal points—early 1936 (to reopen the Kirov investigation), June 1937 (to unleash Ezhov), and November 1937 (to condemn Piatakov)—to spark an uncontrolled explosion. . . . The existence of high-level personal rivalries, disputes over development or modernization plans, powerful and conflicting centrifugal and centripetal forces, and local conflicts made large-scale political violence possible and even likely.⁷⁴

Getty recognizes that in some circumstances individuals can have significant (“catalytic”) effects, but does not go so far as to give Stalin control over the Great Purges. In this view, it did not take an unusual person or style of leadership to unleash the Great Purges. Getty’s apparent reluctance to take seriously the possibility of Stalin’s pathology calls to mind Taylor’s failure to see that Hitler’s

71. *Ibid.*, 205–206.

72. *Ibid.*, 205.

73. In a defense of his position in a later article, Getty wrote: “We need not turn Stalin into an omniscient and omnipotent demon in order to comprehend his evil. . . . Stalin was a cruel but ordinary mortal unable to see the future and with a limited ability to create and control it. He was not a master planner, and studies of all of his other policies before and after the 1930s have shown that he stumbled into everything from collectivization to foreign policy. Stalin’s colossal felonies, like most violent crimes everywhere, were of the unplanned erratic kind. His evil, like Eichmann’s, was ordinary and of this world; it was banally human and is more horrifying for being so.” (Getty, “The Politics of Repression Revisited,” in *Stalinist Terror*, 62.) The resemblances to Taylor and Deutscher are nowhere more striking than in the above passage.

It should be noted that Sheila Fitzpatrick, a leading revisionist, in her recent study of collectivization writes of its precipitating “crisis,” the war scare of 1927: “This need not have been a crisis, but Stalin—overruling the arguments of the future Right Opposition—decided to make it one.” (Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants* [New York, 1994], 38.) In short, Stalin did not stumble, but pushed.

74. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 206.

projects had an all-or-nothing seriousness about them quite different from the alcohol-inspired, bellicose talk in *Bierstuben*. Like Taylor, who offers readers a Chaplinesque Hitler, Getty makes Stalin over (one imagines, for an American audience) in the following passage: "In the thirties, Stalin was often a populist muckraker, and his image . . . was of someone who hated neckties."⁷⁵

Getty does make a perfunctory effort to factor out the causal weight of Stalin's leadership; but he clearly aims to show that it could not possibly produce such a massive effect; and he makes every effort to de-demonize Stalin. The main thrust of revisionism is to bring intermediate or lower level structures into play, or to diffuse agential power and reduce Stalin's individual agency by positing a chaotic situation. Stalin's agency remains a real, but somewhat vague factor, only intermittently interacting with structural causes.

V

Theoretical discussion of individual agency has taken place in recent decades in connection with broader debates, mainly among philosophers and sociologists. Beginning in the 1950s the debate between methodological individualists and holists achieved a certain prominence among philosophers of science and social scientists.⁷⁶ More recently, theorists have moved the debate to the middle ground of "structuration," "structurism," or "relationism."⁷⁷ They tend to establish the interaction of macro and micro, of structure and agency, and to eschew unidirectional causation. Take, for example, Christopher Lloyd's "methodological structurism":

In this model *social structures are the emergent ensemble of rules, roles, relations, and meanings* that people are born into and which organize and are reproduced and transformed by their thought and action. It is people who generate structures over time and initiate change, not the society itself, but their generative activity and initiative are socially constrained. This ontology denies the legitimacy of the action/society polarity that the others [individualist and holist ontologies] are based on and attempts to conceptualize action and society as being an interpenetrating duality in the sense advocated by Jean Piaget and Anthony Giddens. There is a duality of causal power in this model, with humans having structuring power and structures having enabling and constraining power.⁷⁸

According to Lloyd's structurist ontology (an unfortunate term in some respects, because of its resemblance to "structuralist," from which it differs sig-

75. *Ibid.*

76. See, for example, the works cited in W. H. Dray's bibliography appended to his article, "Holism and Individualism in History and Social Science," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967), III, 53–58.

77. Anthony Giddens provided the main impulse in this direction. See, for example, Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley, 1979); *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Christopher G. A. Bryant and David Jary (London, 1991); Christopher Lloyd, *The Structures of History*. To Giddens's "structurationism" and Lloyd's "structurism," Pyotr Sztompka added the term "relationism." See *Human Agency and the Reorientation of Social Theory*, ed. P. Sztompka (New York, 1994).

78. C. Lloyd, *The Structures of History*, 43.

nificantly) “persons have agential power, structures have conditioning power.”⁷⁹ Lloyd suggests that historians now widely practice methodological structuralism without articulating its underlying assumptions.⁸⁰

The model’s concept of emergent structure requires a multilevel view of social and cultural space with new properties emerging at higher levels. “Structure” may embrace a society or culture seen as a systemic whole, systemic relationships at various levels, or a single institution. Historians may describe an individual’s or group’s actions in social and cultural spaces ranging from macrostructures (for example, groups of states and their economic, social, and cultural systems), to middle-range structures (domestic political institutions, bureaucracies, corporations, social organizations, regional culture), to relatively modest structures (a great variety of organized groups, sects, subcultures), and microstructures at the “top,” “bottom,” “center,” and “margins” of society (oligarchies, elite clubs, cultural and social in-groups, out-groups, families). Individuals and groups have greater or lesser weight, greater or lesser agential power at different levels and in different locations. In any given interaction, historians may assign agential power and determine the balance of causation in different ways; there is no fixed formula for micro-macro links. “Micro” and “macro” are themselves relative and can be arranged in various schemas.⁸¹ Moreover, structural relationships change at varying rates (sometimes catastrophically) and agential powers presumably change with them.

Theorists in the social sciences have long criticized the over-socialized, over-enculturated view that depicted individuals as wholly shaped by social and cultural forces.⁸² The old notion that we are an imperfectly social species receives much support from psychoanalysis, which posits universal ambivalence toward authority issuing from the peculiarities of human development. Moreover, individuals and groups not only naturally resist the authorities that teach them rules, roles, values, symbols, and interpretive schemas, they tend to learn differently what they are taught for a variety of reasons.⁸³ In short, socialization

79. *Ibid.*, 46.

80. *Ibid.*, 7.

81. For example, William McKinley Runyan offers a model with six system levels: “persons (including their psychological processes), groups (ranging from two-person relationships, through families, to social groups), organizations (such as formally organized business, church, and political bodies), institutions (such as political, military and religious institutions, which would include a number of specific organizations within them), nations (or entire socio-cultural systems), and, finally, international or intersocietal relationships.” See *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, ed. William McKinley Runyan (New York, 1988), 250–251. The challenge for those seeking to integrate structure and agency is to link persons and their psychological processes with system levels.

82. For example, see Dennis H. Wrong, “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology,” *American Sociological Review* 26 (1961), 183–193.

83. Individuals not only actively interpret and reshape what they have learned to harmonize with their own needs, desires, and the constraints of their circumstances, their reception of culture also reflects the vagaries of cultural transmission. In no event can members of a society or culture be thought of as recipients of “pure” information or rules; and they are surely not mere thinking machines replicating information and rules. What is at issue here is not the widely accepted notion that we are all in some fashion agents, but the assessment of agential power in scholarly discourse, where biases in favor of either structure or agency often prevent scholars from appreciating their interconnectedness.

and enculturation do not yield uniform results, and in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe (the time and place relevant to this investigation) people were often resocialized and reculturated at different points in their lives and at different sociocultural “locations.”⁸⁴ This pluralistic and dynamic view carries with it many consequences: a far richer notion of sociocultural heterogeneity than previously assumed, a much more complex picture of sociocultural change, greater latitude for agency, whether individual or collective, and a greater allowance for contingency.

Tucker

A structurationist or structurist view accords the Great Dictators a significant, even crucial role in determining certain events, but recognizes that structures shaped their ideas and actions continuously, and both promoted and limited their power. For example, Robert C. Tucker’s analysis of the Great Purges in *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1929–1941* (1990) takes into account a variety of structural factors, such as Russian political culture, shorter-term Bolshevik political practice, and new structural factors in domestic and international politics.

Tucker’s Stalin does not act precipitately, partly for structural reasons and partly because of his personal preference for carefully prepared campaigns. Between 1932 and 1934 Stalin both identified the opposition in the existing Party and state institutions and began the restructuring that would permit him simultaneously to rid himself of past opposition and intimidate any potential opponents. Tucker’s Stalin chose among a variety of options available to him from several species of political culture.⁸⁵ Russian political culture offered a tradition of drastic methods for dealing with internal enemies.⁸⁶ Bolshevik political practice, itself connected with a longer term revolutionary subculture, sanctified the notion of purging and had an institutional structure for it. However, under the political rules established during Lenin’s regime, the Party punished

84. Resocialization and reculturation (the latter a term I have encountered in T. H. Von Laue’s *The World Revolution of Westernization* [New York, 1987]) here mean recruitment into a group with rules that sometimes require one to do violence to or repudiate the very group into which one was first socialized and enculturated. This can happen, for example, if one joins a gang, army, bureaucracy, religious sect, political party, or cultural movement. Anyone conversant with the biographies of Stalin and Hitler, for example, appreciates the extent to which they both were transformed by military and political life.

85. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1929–1941* (New York, 1990), chapter 12. Hereafter cited as *Stalin in Power*. One might note how Tucker’s approach differs from Deutscher’s. Deutscher’s Stalin responded to structural imperatives by imitating Tsars in the past who had faced similar structural pressures. Tucker, on the other hand, portrays a ruler with a paranoid personality identifying himself with other paranoid rulers and selecting from Russian political culture elements of a paranoid style of rule.

86. In view of the revolutionaries’ repudiation of Tsarism, it may seem odd that they should perpetuate its political culture. On the one hand, the revolutionaries consciously manipulated those whom they ruled by an appeal to tradition. On the other, as products of the same culture, they sometimes unconsciously identified themselves with the oppressor. This “domestication” and inversion of revolutionary ideology in practice is a quite familiar phenomenon, dramatized in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

those who had strayed from the Party line by taking their membership cards rather than their lives. According to Tucker, Stalin chose to emulate not Lenin, but Ivan the Dread, and to avoid both Lenin's and Ivan's "mistakes." Stalin also approvingly noted Hitler's purge of the Sturmabteilung on June 30–July 2, 1934, a decisive and bloody action against former comrades in arms. In a "conspiracy from above,"⁸⁷ Stalin created both the administrative framework and the paranoid atmosphere to facilitate the Great Purges.

In Tucker's analysis, those "below" Stalin or at the "periphery" had choices, just as Stalin did. For example, Party stalwarts dutifully and sometimes zealously carried out his policy. Ruthlessly ambitious individuals seized the opportunity to advance themselves within the new structures over the corpses of their former bosses; merely vengeful ones saw an opportunity to inflict harm on personal enemies. Important Party figures, of course, were forced, sometimes through torture, to implicate and denounce others in show trials. Many other Soviet citizens were forced to participate in false denunciations or else to become victims themselves; they succumbed to fear.⁸⁸ As with any such mass phenomenon, ordinary individuals felt a variety of pressures to join the campaign.⁸⁹ Some resorted to the desperate expedient of denouncing so many others that the entire system, so they reasoned, would have to collapse. According to Tucker's analysis:

By the close of 1938 . . . there were dossiers on practically the whole adult population of the country. As in collectivization, when Stalin deliberately started a process that got out of hand and took a catastrophic turn as sullen peasants slaughtered their livestock, so now his carefully prepared and precipitated reign of terror took on a spontaneous momentum of its own with results that he probably had failed to foresee.⁹⁰

Tucker's approach suggests that any complete analysis of the Great Purges should include: the centuries-old Russian political culture with its brutal methods for dealing with "traitors"; shorter term Bolshevik political institutions; a contemporary international environment encouraging extreme measures; Stalin's paranoid personality; the formal structures created from above at his instigation to facilitate the purges; the propaganda of immediate historical threats and conspiracies;⁹¹ a variety of initiatives on the part of individual agents

87. Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 271–275.

88. Tucker describes all of this in "The Terror Process," *Stalin in Power*, 441–478. Interestingly, throughout his examination of the Great Purges Tucker implicitly refutes Getty's position without referring to Getty's book. Although Tucker does recognize that Stalin had an "army of active helpers," he shows how Stalin enlisted them as active accomplices, rather than the other way around. Tucker pictures a vast process generated from above. Fitzpatrick, in *Stalin's Peasants*, shows how ordinary people could use denunciations as a way of manipulating the regime—a way of exercising agential power indirectly.

89. Christopher R. Browning's book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 & the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992), shows how situational pressures rather than the threat of formal penalties affected the behavior of reservists during the waning days of Hitler's regime.

90. Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 473.

91. Tucker emphasizes Stalin's particular animus against Trotsky in the dramatization of the "plot" against the Soviet Union and its leaders.

scattered through Party and state institutions; and the complicity of ordinary people, some of whom were forced to participate and others of whom acted out of ambition or vindictiveness.⁹² In the aggregate all of this led to destructive campaigns that even Stalin could not always control. Whereas Getty emphasizes the initiatives coming “from below” in the Great Purges, Tucker describes “state terrorism” prepared carefully and conspiratorially “from above.” Like any mass mobilization, it could not conform precisely to any script, but could, and did, achieve the main ends sought by Stalin personally. For Tucker, the Great Purges owed their massive character to Stalin’s manipulations and the interactions of structures and agents at every level of the party-state regime.

Tucker’s handling of problems of agency and structure may be more satisfactory than Deutscher’s or Getty’s, but one cannot derive from it a general formula for assigning causal weight to agency and structure. Nor should one expect any historian to venture such a formula. Even if they can establish a given individual’s authorship of a policy, describe the agential and structural factors that partially shaped it, and those that promoted, impeded, or refashioned it, without a real laboratory historians can only manipulate variables in their imaginations when examining the interaction of an individual’s agential power and these other factors.⁹³ So it is in historians’ assessments of the agential power of Great Dictators.

All leaders are both shaped and constrained by a variety of circumstances; but by any reasonable test, Hitler’s and Stalin’s personalities had major impact in the 1930s and 1940s. Despite revisionist success in seeing how things operate

92. This summary of Tucker’s approach does not imply that his is the only way to deal with structure and agency, or that he has exhausted all possible formulations of interactions of structure and agency in discussing the causes and character of the Great Purges.

93. If, for example, in a thought experiment one tries to remove Hitler’s personality from the German picture, The Holocaust becomes difficult to explain and so does the conduct of World War II. One might ask what a person trying to predict the trajectory of anti-Semitic feeling in Europe would guess from what was known in the 1920s. Despite the existence of anti-Semitism in both pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany, the probabilities of a genocidal policy towards European Jews being launched from Germany would no doubt have seemed extremely low, if imaginable at all. Mathematically inclined historians might have looked at areas of dense Jewish settlement in Europe, the frequency of anti-Jewish campaigns and casualties during pogroms in the modern era, and the violence inflicted on Ukrainian and Polish Jews during the Civil War following the October Revolution. See *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (New York, 1992). In a recent book Daniel Goldhagen avers that an especially virulent “eliminationist” form of anti-Semitism in Germany was easily converted into a genocidal program, but he also gives Hitler a leading role. “Any evaluation of these events must begin with Hitler. However much more we would like to know about Hitler’s deliberations and role, it is nonetheless clear that Hitler, having made the crucial decisions himself, was the prime mover of the persecution that culminated in genocide.” (Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* [New York, 1996], 133–134.)

Opponents of the revisionists of Stalinism have long argued that the potential leaders crushed by Stalin would not have sponsored the campaigns that raged through the Soviet Union. In their thought experiments, Lenin lives to extend NEP, or his “true heirs” (Bukharin for some, Trotsky for others) succeed in the power struggle against Stalin and develop a more rational and humane policy. Moshe Lewin, among others, propounded the notion of Lenin’s “Testament,” which was popular during the Gorbachev era and earlier. See, for example Lewin, *Lenin’s Testament*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1968).

at “lower” levels or on the “periphery,” the most striking political feature of the regimes of Hitler and Stalin is the ability of leaders at the “top” or “center” to mobilize an organization or group of organizations to carry out their policies in quite extraordinary circumstances, in which tens of millions of people were required to violate longstanding social and cultural norms, rules, and habits. What is impressive is not the confusion, the heterogeneous responses, the resistance, the organizational foulups, or even the ultimate failure of the Great Dictators to achieve their ideological ends, but the magnitude of their impact.

The collapse of Communist regimes has provided new evidence in support of the last point. Newly opened archives provide the “smoking gun” for Stalin’s personal involvement in the Great Purges. Moreover, events in the territory of the former Soviet Union and what was formerly Yugoslavia tend to confirm the role played by the “top” or “center” in either containing or unleashing mass violence against target populations. Those inclined to credit individual agency (not all of whom champion the totalitarian model) now can argue more forcefully that it is important not only to take into account the ideologies that urged or sanctioned the deaths of millions in order to achieve a desired end, but to examine closely the leaders who turned ideology into policy.⁹⁴ It is not difficult to trace ideological and political genealogies from Marx, Engels, and Lenin to Stalin. However, even if they provided him with much of his world view, rhetoric, and political gadgetry, Stalin’s mentors’ ideas and practices alone do not account for his actions. Not just any Marxist would have ruthlessly carried through collectivization or the Great Purges.

In revolutionary politics, whatever the ideological inspiration governing a leader’s vision, ad hoc institutional arrangements and policies are the rule. In modern mass societies, revolutions set tens or hundreds of millions of lives into motion, precluding any systematic control of outcomes. To demand as a test of agential power that leaders have precise knowledge or control of outcomes in revolutionary campaigns makes as much sense as demanding that someone who dynamites a structure predict and control precisely the disposition of the rubble. It is sufficient that leaders seek and acquire power, formulate and launch policy initiatives, intervene effectively in events, reflect on the consequences of their policies, and adapt themselves to evolving situations. Revolutionary leaders often construct from the rubble even stronger foundations for their authority and power than they had before.

It takes quite sophisticated theoretical manipulation to fashion leaders into mere personifications of old or new structures, or, as Deutscher did, into some combination of the old and new. Stalin and Hitler were not ordinary in any plain sense of the term: they were not personifications of any recognizable social or cultural group, save perhaps the spacious but imprecise category of “marginal men”; they were men of unusual ambitions and very odd mentalities when

94. Among recent non-revisionist students of Hitler and Stalin, Bullock, Robert Conquest, Robert C. Tucker, and Dmitrii Volkogonov make a strenuous effort to connect a given policy and its execution precisely to the ideas, intentions, and actions of individual agents.

compared to traditional statesmen. Although they tended to imitate each other in some respects, creating ruling systems with sufficiently similar features to inspire scholars to construct the totalitarian model, Hitler and Stalin were quite different from one another. Nor can they be convincingly presented as evil everymen writ large. Banal perpetrators of evil, whatever their personal motives, inflict criminal harm on targets of opportunity in their immediate environments; they provide the local leadership and manpower for pogroms and flourish in wartime; their aggregate violence is impressive, but they are rarely able to get and keep authority and power, and to unleash mass murder on the scale of the Holocaust, World War Two, collectivization, or the Great Purges. They do, however, make excellent henchmen for leaders like Stalin and Hitler.

Hypotheses about psychological links between the Great Dictators and their constituencies are very speculative and few historians find them compelling. Psychosocial and psychocultural theories tend to cast such leaders as symptoms of collective psychological malaise. Empirically based studies, however, reveal a wide range of reactions to Nazi mobilization.⁹⁵ Although they do not rule out collective pathologies, such studies tend to show that leaders like Stalin and Hitler, who had established their effectiveness, could exploit their followers' trust and reliance on the one hand, and general insecurity and fear on the other. Once they achieved a certain level of authority and power, Hitler and Stalin could press for goals that the people who became their instruments may or may not have shared. Getty, for example, recognizes that Stalin used the purges to settle personal scores, but mutes this aspect of the Great Purges.⁹⁶ The Great Dictators had sufficient power to overawe their less committed subjects and suppress dissidents. One finds in subject populations different measures of enthusiasm, dutifulness, indifference, fearful submission, and opposition in response to techniques of mass mobilization combined with state terrorism.⁹⁷ The psychological bases of participation in such mobilizations cannot easily be assessed.

Twentieth-century events before and after those examined here suggest the existence of structural causes similar to those behind collectivization, the Great Purges, World War II, and the Holocaust. Historians can point to atrocities against ethnic populations before World War II and the Holocaust, and cite current events which show that the tinder for genocide still exists. Collectivization and the Great Purges, too, can be reviewed in the light of massively destruc-

95. Among students of psychohistory, Fred Weinstein has made a very strong case for heterogeneity. See, for example, Weinstein, *The Dynamics of Nazism* (New York, 1980); *History and Theory after the Fall* (Chicago, 1990).

96. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 172.

97. Weinstein, for example, recognizes the general distress among Germans due to the extended crises of war, imperial collapse, economic crisis, and so on, but finds futile any effort at blanket diagnoses explaining Nazism. He cites one study of German prisoners of war suggesting that most Germans were probably indifferent and passive in the face of Nazi efforts at mobilization. Only 11% were fanatics, 40% indifferent, 25% believers with reservations, 15% passive anti-Nazis, 9% active anti-Nazis. See Weinstein's *The Dynamics of Nazism*, 28.

tive revolutionary campaigns in China and Cambodia. Revolutions continue to devour their children. War, imperial collapse, revolution, civil war, economic crises, and new political institutions yield unstable conditions which loosen the restraints on vengeful behavior among groups living together on uneasy terms. Leadership, though only one factor in a complex structural setting, acquires greater weight in determining policies, and as a corollary the personal qualities of leaders may have greater impact. It has been well demonstrated in the twentieth century that leader-centered regimes can either dampen or inflame grassroots hatreds.

Assuming that a strong case has been made for Hitler's and Stalin's agential power, and that similar claims might be made for revolutionary leaders in general, one wonders if there is any hope for a general theory of individual agency in history. It might be useful first to review the criteria for agency: that actions be *effective*; that they be *intentional*; that they be sufficiently *unconstrained* so that they are not fully predictable; and that actors be *reflexive* in evaluating their actions.⁹⁸ Historians apply these criteria interpretively to actors functioning in quite different settings. Individual agency surely varies from culture to culture, from time to time in a given culture, and at different locations in a single culture at a given time. It is multivalent. Even if we assume that two historians manipulating the same variables might arrive at similar conclusions about the interaction of agency and structure, the odds are small that many historians would work with precisely the same variables and interpret their interactions in the same way. One might ask, then, if there is at least a theoretical approach that one might use together with structuration theory to explain the appearance of figures with the agential power of a Hitler or Stalin. Evolutionary theories of culture have much to offer, but they are still inchoate and have several drawbacks.

Though new evolutionary theories of culture fall prey to all of the dangers of analogy in that they try to establish cultural ecologies and the cultural equivalent of genes, some of the analogies are quite fruitful. The theories have a number of virtues: recognition of contingency in history and probabilistic rather than deterministic models; the use of ecological approaches (analysis of populations) to link micro and macro; recognition of variation in a given population; the assumption of complexity and multiple (perhaps contradictory) demands on individuals; a flexible position with respect to structure-generating rules, that is, rules leave space for agential choice and creativity and can be changed or broken by individuals and groups. Thus, a combination of structure and agency, of rule transmission and rule transformation in given populations,

98. It is, of course, unreasonable to require as a test for agential power that leaders formulate their policies down to the last detail, that the policies be fully rational (in an instrumental sense), that the leaders systematically micromanage their execution, and that the outcomes line up precisely with the leaders' intentions. With respect to the last issue Dray wrote: "For holding that a person causes what he intends need not commit us to the absurd idea that a causally significant intention must itself be a sufficient condition of what it causes. It is quite enough that it be a necessary one." Dray, "Concepts of Causation," 152.

accounts for continuity and change. However, it is quite difficult to identify the units available for selection in evolutionary theories featuring the idea of cultural selection. Such efforts are being made, but the specification of the cultural equivalent of genes remains a daunting task.⁹⁹

Assuming that the evolutionary approach is promising, how might one apply it to figures like Hitler or Stalin? Many different types of authority confer agential power, but what is striking here is the virtually unassailable authority acquired by the leaders. Surely, the acquisition of this kind of authority depends upon special conditions. No one, to my knowledge, has set forth a theory averring, for example, that in given cultures, certain kinds of structural crises tend to “select” (with some probability of prediction and retrodiction) political-cultural “genes” for dictatorial regimes with paranoid styles of leadership; and that such regimes, once constituted, often profoundly reconfigure their cultures, at least for a time.¹⁰⁰ In pursuing a theory of this sort, one would have to designate the variations available for selection, an approach that might inspire an investigation similar in some respects to Deutscher’s and Tucker’s search for Stalin’s genealogy in Russian and revolutionary political culture, and in the practice of Stalin’s fellow Great Dictators. Only a significant number of cases and comparative studies would make a convincing argument on behalf of a theory that structural crises in given cultures tend to promote the selection of distinct styles of leadership and, possibly, certain psychologies.

Until the elaboration of an evolutionary and comparative approach of the sort sketched out above, the safest method is the plain historical one, in which investigators establish the precise historical circumstances in which individuals actually acquire and sustain an exceptional degree of authority and power. The most recent work, whether revisionist or non-revisionist, supports a structurationist outlook, with an interpenetration of structure and agency, but there is quite wide latitude in such approaches. Perhaps historians themselves illustrate structuration theory, which guarantees heterogeneity and change. It seems reasonable to assume that if they were confronted with a choice among theories featuring exclusively structural causation, Great Man theories, and some species of structuration theory, historians would most likely choose structurationism. They would nonetheless still continue to interpret the interaction of agency and structure, and their interpretations would surely differ. Getty’s concessions to

99. The theoretical virtues listed above are derived from the discussion in T. Dietz and T. R. Burns, “Human Agency and the Evolutionary Dynamics of Culture.” Some important works advocating an evolutionary theory of culture are: C. J. Lumsden and E. O. Wilson, *Mind and Culture: The Coevolutionary Process* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); R. Boyd and P. Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (Chicago, 1985); William H. Durham, *Coevolution* (Stanford, Calif., 1991).

There is no settled theoretical vocabulary for an evolutionary theory of culture. Among the nouns (some familiar, some neologistic) proposed to denote the cultural equivalent of genes (that is, the information-carrying units selected by evolutionary processes) one finds: “idea,” “symbol,” “theme,” “concept,” “culture-type,” “meme.” See Durham, *Coevolution*, 188–189, n. 25.

100. One recent study that makes an effort in this direction is Daniel Chirot’s *Modern Tyrants* (New York, 1994). Chirot compares thirteen modern tyrannies.

Stalin's "catalyzing" role, for example, seem like tokenism when compared with Tucker's findings with respect to Stalin's agential power. Thus, even if we imagine historians explicitly forming a consensus around a structurationist position, the range of interpretation would very probably still be sufficiently wide to accommodate a Getty and a Tucker, and the pendulum would continue to swing to and fro.

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