

The West Must Never Again Go Totalitarian

[The West Must Never Again Go Totalitarian](#)

by [Joakim Book](#), *Brownstone Institute*

January 26, 2023

The West can never again go [totalitarian](#).

We saw it happen generations ago. We fought two of humanity's most destructive wars and faced the horror of industrial-scale extermination. Never again, said the world's peoples in the late 1940s, and they began the difficult task of uncovering all that had been done, all that had gone wrong.

The mass graves, the German and Soviet labor camps, the Japanese massacres in the Far East, America's internment camps, the secret police and the mutilations, the ever-present threat of violence hanging over every member of society. We saw the personality cults around Hitler or Stalin for what they were, the blatant ideologies for what they had resulted in.

When the Berlin Wall fell in November of 1989, and with it the remains of the Evil Empire that had put it there, we discovered more horror. The archives of East Germany and the Kremlin showed that informants were everywhere happily giving up information – real or invented – on their fellow humans. We found more bodies. We learned that under enough fear and pressure, human life wasn't worth anything. When push came to violent shove, bonds of family and community meant nothing.

The error of this terrifying history is to think that this was a problem of "the other," someone far away who is nothing like

us. Asks Thorsteinn Siglaugsson in a recent [article](#): "How do you find your inner Nazi? And how do you get him under control? Most people would have participated in the atrocities of their time, had they been put in that position – or at least sat by and allowed them to happen."

In [The Gulag Archipelago](#), Solzhenitsyn's oft used and highly relevant phrase says that the line between good and evil passes "right through every human heart." The passage goes on, and Solzhenitsyn digs even deeper into the most horrifying self-reflection a man can reach: the line of good and evil goes through *all* human hearts, mine included, "This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained."

It oscillates. What is evil isn't always an identifiable thing, a clear enemy, but a blurry line that moves and becomes clear only in hindsight. History is hard like that. It's us, but in the past, doing things we couldn't imagine ourselves doing. Yet millions of our prior selves *did*. Are we really confident enough that with the right external circumstances "we" wouldn't once again?

We received a small-scale test with the upheaval of societies in the last three years. Many of us wonder both [what went wrong](#) in the Covid saga and how the future will look upon the events that took place. Are the anti-vaxxers the unsung heroes who stood up against unjust tyranny, or the new [9/11-truthers](#) nobody really cares about? Are the lockdowners wise lifesavers who hadn't yet perfected a tool that the future takes for granted as obvious and necessary? Only on a long enough historic timeline will we know.

Take the following segment from Michael Malice's [The White Pill: A Tale of Good And Evil](#), a newly released and much-needed account of the Soviet Union's totalitarianism:

“Even if the man on the street felt something wasn’t quite adding up, it was very difficult for him to get the full picture – especially in a culture where questioning authority could have deadly consequences for oneself and one’s entire family. The newspapers were filled with boasts about enormous achievements of production and the success of heroic ‘Stakhanovite’ workers, yet there were no clothes in the stores and no food on the shelves.”

Even to the regular Joe (or Vladimir...), something wasn’t adding up:

“Sure the papers might make mistakes or have a bias, but they couldn’t realistically be filled with lies, week after week, year after year. ... Only crazy people would think that there was a conspiracy to control the news and what information reached the public. The only possible logical alternative was that someone must have been keeping the productive socialist bounty from reaching the people. It had to be the wreckers.”

The echo of 2020-22 intrudes, too close for comfort. For is not this precisely what happened to us?

In the early days of Covid, the newspapers were filled first with outrageous disaster porn and fear-mongering and later with “boasts about enormous achievements of production and the success of heroic [Big Pharma] workers,” all the while there were “no clothes in the stores and no food on the shelves.” Everyone took outlandish personal actions, yet the catastrophic numbers shot higher and higher.

Clearly, somebody must have been ruining the good men’s neatly laid plans, those who chanted messianic faith in “two weeks to flatten the curve.” They told us what to do; it got worse than they said; somebody must be wrecking the process.

I did my pandemic part, many people reasoned: I masked and

desanitized and [kept my distance](#) and vaxxed myself over and over to Fauci's delight. Yet, the pathogen kept spreading and people kept dying and I even got sick, again and again – something the rulers repeatedly said was impossible. And then [it wasn't](#), which they said was always going to happen.

It felt scripted, of course. When I for [Brownstone reviewed Mattias Desmet's great book](#) on totalitarianism last summer, I wrote that toying with objective truth is precisely what totalitarian regimes do:

“The collective hums together and upholds the rules, no matter how insane or ineffective at achieving their supposed aim. Totalitarianism is the blurring of fact and fiction, yet with an aggressive intolerance for diverging opinions. One must toe the line.”

It matters not whether the charge holds water or has logic on its side; it just has to stick, by endless repetition if need be. Like all propaganda. In the last few years surely, there must have been some evil group of detractors undermining the Party's good efforts. Those fifthly pandemic wreckers, the anti-vaxxers! They are nothing; less than nothing, and [it's OK to blame them!](#)

Replace “wreckers” with anti-vaxxers, the media's boasts of Soviet production with today's establishment elite's never-ending yapping about vaccine efficacy or lockdown effects or responsible monetary policy, and Malice's distant history feels much closer to our recently lived-through present.

We might still have food on the shelves – though of [worse quality](#) and at much higher prices. We might still have the ability to move and work and travel, but heavily circumscribed, always at risk of canceling and always with papers showing the number of needles in your arm, or your [scarred heart tissue](#). Nobody is torturing us (yet anyway) and for the most part we have some semblance of rights and

freedoms remaining.

But we're closer to that horrific totalitarian world today than we were, say five years ago. Or perhaps it was just always there, calmly waiting to be unleashed like Solzhenitsyn implied.

What Malice's book so expertly chronicles is that elites can be wrong. Wrong in facts, wrong in morals. It is possible that whole sways of intellectuals, scientists, journalists, professionals, and civil servants can be deceived and deluded, for decades stubbornly refuse to admit their error.

The 1930s US intelligentsia's view of Comrade Stalin and the Soviet Union is one such episode. The warmongering early 2000s in Britain and the US, though far from unopposed by the public, is another.

Nothing shows this better than my own field of economics, riddled with [wrong calls](#) and [embarrassing prediction](#) errors. The Great Moderation of stable growth, low inflation and unemployment, circa 1990 to 2007, is another collective bout of madness and mistaken optimism.

Four years before the Great Recession began, Nobel laureate [Robert Lucas](#) gave a presidential address to the American Economics Association saying that macroeconomics had succeeded: "its central problem of depression prevention has been solved, for all practical purposes, and has in fact been solved for many decades." In the summer of 2008, already nine months into the recession and merely weeks before Lehman Brothers collapsed, Olivier Blanchard, then at the IMF, published "[The State of Macro is Good.](#)"

The year 2020 marked the beginning of just another such episode of [collective insanity](#). It will take some time and soul-searching before we can once again view the errors of our time the way we now view the "adulation of Stalin's professed ideology," or laugh at them like we do the [crooks](#) in *The Big*

Short.

But Malice's message is ultimately optimistic. "[I'm not saying nothing bad ever happens](#)," he confesses, but that evil isn't almighty, doesn't have to win. It might take a while, but even for the West's most malevolent elements, the "[costs are just going to be too much for them to bear – and they're going to fold](#)."

One day, a future chronicler might look upon the Covid era with the same deep incredulity that Malice's readers look upon the Soviet Union.

[Joakim Book](#) is a writer and researcher with a deep interest for money and financial history. He holds an MSc from the University of Oxford.

[Connect with Brownstone Institute](#)

Cover image: Polish Jews captured by Germans during the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Poland) – Photo from Jürgen Stroop Report to Heinrich Himmler from May 1943. One of the most famous pictures of World War II. ([Public Domain](#))