

FRANCESCO BERTI

ORCID: 0000-0002-6493-6516

Università di Padova

francesco.berti@unipd.it

Reflecting on Pipes's and Brzeziński's works: Vittorio Strada and the nature of totalitarian dictatorships

Abstract

Vittorio Strada, one of the most distinguished Italian scholars of 19th- and 20th-century Russian literature and political history, formulated his final interpretation of the Russian revolution and its internal stages, the relationship between Marx, Lenin and Stalin's thought, the concept of totalitarianism and the troublesome comparison between Nazism and communism between the 1980s and the 1990s. Expanding upon Richard Pipes's thesis about the preservation of a czarist, authoritarian spirit and corresponding institutions in the Soviet state and Brzeziński's and Friedrich's refinement of the well-known concept of totalitarianism, Strada perfected his own interpretation of Soviet communism and in turn made it more useful to analyze totalitarian systems and ideologies.

Keywords: Vittorio Strada, Richard Pipes, Zbigniew Brzeziński, concept of totalitarianism.

Vittorio Strada and his works

Vittorio Strada was one of the most distinguished Italian scholars of 19th- and 20th-century Russian literature and political history.¹ Unfortunately, his works are not very well known outside Italy, because he was educated before "the English-speaking world" and the Internet era came into being. Due to this, he never played close attention to the importance of the translation of his books and essays into

¹ See *La Russia e l'Occidente. Visioni, riflessioni e codici ispirati a Vittorio Strada*, eds. F. Berti, A. Dell'Asta, O. Strada, Venezia 2020.

English.² Nevertheless, his name was quite famous among the international community of scholars — especially in Russia, of course,³ but also in Poland — not least because of his relationships with the dissidents in the Soviet Union and in other countries ruled by communist parties, like Poland and Czechoslovakia.⁴

In 1957, during his first stay in Russia, while he was still a young Marxist scholar, Strada met with Boris Pasternak at the writer's dacha in Peredelkino.⁵ The legendary Russian poet and novelist had learned of an article written by Strada in the Italian communist weekly journal *Il Contemporaneo*, in which Pasternak's works were presented in a very favorable light.⁶ Pasternak instantly understood that he could sincerely trust him, so much so that months later he asked Strada to convince the editor Giangiacomo Feltrinelli to publish *Doctor Zhivago*, even though soviet authorities were already trying to force him to withdraw his consent to the publication of the book. And for this reason, if *Doctor Zhivago* was to finally be published, Strada was quite influential, albeit not decisive, in the Zhivago case.⁷

In the following years, Strada also met other Soviet intellectuals, such as the authors of *Novy Mir*, novelists like Viktor Nekrasov, poets like Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky. Above all, he formed a lasting friendship with

² Among the important works of Strada, I limit myself to quoting his monographic studies: V. Strada, *Tradizione e rivoluzione nella letteratura russa*, Torino 1980; V. Strada, *Le veglie della ragione. Miti e figure della letteratura russa da Dostoevskij a Pasternak*, Torino 1986; V. Strada, *Simbolo e storia. Aspetti e problemi del Novecento russo*, Venezia 1988; V. Strada, *Incontro con Pasternak*, Napoli 1990; V. Strada, *La questione russa. Identità e destino*, Venezia 1991; V. Strada, *L'altra rivoluzione. Gor'kij, Lunačarskij, Bogdanov. La 'Scuola di Capri' e la 'Costruzione di Dio'*, Capri 1994; V. Strada, S. Kulešov, *Il fascismo russo*, Venezia 1998; V. Strada, *Autoritratto autocritico. Archeologia della rivoluzione d'Ottobre*, Roma 2004; V. Strada, *EuroRussia. Letteratura e cultura da Pietro il Grande alla rivoluzione*, Roma-Bari 2005; V. Strada, *La rivoluzione svelata. Una lettura nuova dell'Ottobre 1917*, Roma 2007; V. Strada, *Lenin, Stalin, Putin. Studi su comunismo e postcomunismo*, Soveria Mannelli 2011; V. Strada, *Europe. La Russia come frontiera*, Venezia 2014; V. Strada, *Impero e rivoluzione. Russia 1917–2017*, Venezia 2017; V. Strada, *Il dovere di uccidere. Le radici storiche del terrorismo*, Venezia 2018. Strada also edited (with E. Hobsbawm and other historians) a multi-volume history of Marxism printed by Einaudi in Turin (1978–82) and (with E. Etkind, G. Nivat and I. Serman) a five-volume *Histoire de la littérature russe* for Fayard in Paris (1987). He also promoted and edited the journal *Rossija/Russia*, printed in Italy and then in Russia, to which several Western and Eastern scholars contributed.

³ See the miscellaneous work: *Vittorio: международный научный сборник, посвященный 75-летию Витторियो Страды*, eds. С.Г. Бочаров, А.Е. Парнис, Москва 2005, a tribute paid to Strada's work by a group of intellectuals and scholars, most of them Russians.

⁴ C. Strada Janovic, *Una infanzia siberiana*, Venezia 2017, p. 159. Clara Janovic, Strada's wife remembered that pope John Paul II in 1990 recognized professor Strada after a concert in the Vatican and stopped to greet him.

⁵ This episode is described in V. Strada, *Autoritratto autocritico...*, pp. 36–37 and V. Strada, *Incontro con Pasternak*, pp. 58–59.

⁶ V. Strada, "L'uomo Pasternak," *Il Contemporaneo*, 1956, November 3.

⁷ P. Mancosu, *Živago nella tempesta. Le avventure editoriali del capolavoro di Pasternak*, Milano 2015, reconstructed the rich texture of events which lead up to the publication of Pasternak's book.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose works he greatly admired. In 1968 Strada and his family were arrested by the Soviet police at the airport because he was trying to deliver a letter from Solzhenitsyn to *L'Unità* in Italy.⁸ During his lifetime Strada not only wrote dozens of books and articles about the cultural and political history of Russia,⁹ but also translated many Russian novels and short stories into Italian, especially during his employment at Einaudi in Turin, prior to his academic career.¹⁰ Despite his early disillusionment with the Khrushchev Thaw and communist ideology itself, Strada's detachment from the Italian Communist Party was incredibly slow: it occurred as late as the 1980s.¹¹

Before this, roughly in the second half of the 1970s, Strada started to consider Lenin's line of thinking as a totalitarian — although absolutely legitimate — development of Marx's philosophy. He also perceived Stalin as Lenin's heir, likewise legitimate, who developed Lenin's thought in an original direction, sharpening some elements of his mentor's doctrine.¹²

It can be reasonably claimed that between the 1980s and the 1990s Strada came to his final interpretation of the Russian revolution and its internal stages, the relationship between Marx, Lenin and Stalin's thought, the concept of totalitarianism and the troublesome comparison between Nazism and communism. In the last years of his life, the Italian scholar expanded the depth of his point of view with new research: his last book was published only a few months before his death.

Vittorio Strada and his general views on totalitarianism

Before taking into consideration Strada's discussion of some ideas elaborated by professors Brzeziński and Pipes, I would like to concisely present Strada's interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution on one side, and his concept of totalitarianism on the other, because it is the indispensable premise to understanding Strada's point of view over the two late professors' works. It is important to remember that the concepts and views which I'm going to present here are the result of research that the Italian scholar carried out for decades, and that in his works they are developed in a very complex way. For the sake of conciseness I am obliged to present them almost like they were geometric axioms.

⁸ V. Strada, *Autoritratto autocritico...*, p. 64.

⁹ Strada also wrote dozens of articles on Russian literature and history for newspapers like *L'Unità*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Avanti!*, *Avvenire*, *Il Giornale*.

¹⁰ The Italian scholar translated works of: E.L. Schwartz, V.P. Nekrasov, V.F. Tendryakov, A.I. Solzhenitsyn, E. Bagritsky, A.P. Czechov, J.N. Davydov, L. Trotsky, A. Walicki, V.I. Lenin, R. Jakobson and edited (in Italian) works of: Y.K. Olesha, M.A. Bulgakov, C.I. Kin, K. Vaginov, G. Lukács, A.V. Lunacharsky, A.I. Gercen, I. Babel, M.A. Lifshitz, J. Lotman, B. Pasternak, I.A. Goncharov.

¹¹ V. Strada, *Autoritratto autocritico...*, p. 78.

¹² See in particular: V. Strada, *La questione russa...* and V. Strada, *Impero e rivoluzione...*

As for the Bolshevik revolution, Strada wrote that it was, from an intellectual point of view, the result of a unique convergence between the radical currents of socialism, like anarchism, nihilism and the radical wing of populism, which in Russia developed in a more extreme way than in other countries, and Marxism, which Lenin succeeded in bringing back to its revolutionary roots.¹³

According to Strada, many crucial and specific features of Bolshevik ideology, like disdain for human life, the concept of the “professional revolutionary,” the cult of violence, the belief that only by destroying entire social classes a socialist society could come into being (just to name a few) can be traced to 19th-century Russian revolutionary thought. The extermination of the entire czarist family was also seen as desirable by a number of revolutionary thinkers before the Revolution of 1917.¹⁴

Strada acknowledged that there were some relevant discrepancies between acts of terrorism and violence carried out by Russian revolutionaries before the Revolution of 1917 and those committed during its course. The former were unsystematic, as they were almost exclusively executed by (and directed at) individuals, which at times led to crises of conscience in the minds of the revolutionaries. The latter were generally systematic and were very often directed against entire groups of people. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks felt fully justified by their revolutionary ideology.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the revolutionary movement created the preconditions of the revolution in a way that the takeover of power by the revolutionaries has to be considered as a

conscious employment of a theory which has been maturing for a century in European political thought, which in Russia was carried out in the most extreme way. In Russia the revolution didn't happen, but it was willed to happen; it was a premeditated act of individual and collective will, and it was the result of a project and an organization, and established its roots in the national context more than in the worldwide arena, although it was motivated by an international goal.¹⁶

In his latest works, Strada pointed out the most important difference between the February and October Revolutions, the goals of which were in many respects totally opposite. As a matter of fact, while the “liberal” February Revolution aimed to accomplish the modernization of Russia started by Peter the Great and Catherine II, the Bolsheviks, despite their internationalism, embodied a new kind of autarchic and extremely authoritarian Slavophilism, which was utterly hostile towards western values and culture. For this reason, the idea that Lenin and his comrades were, in a certain way, almost forced by circumstances to employ extreme violence in order to modernize the reluctant Russian society was completely wrong — it must be considered a political myth. The Russian

¹³ V. Strada, *Totalitarismo e storia*, [in:] V. Strada, S. Kulešov, *Il fascismo russo*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁴ See in particular: V. Strada, *Il dovere di uccidere...*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 163 ff. [Here and subsequently: transl. — F.B.].

¹⁶ V. Strada, *Impero e rivoluzione...*, p. 23.

Revolution was “a colossal historical blunder due to an enormous theoretical mistake, which was inherent in the founding ideology.”¹⁷

Strada definitely came to the belief that the Russian revolution presents — to anyone who is willing to analyze it without any prejudice — an internal coherence that totalitarian ideology and institutions gave it. It is indeed true that the “Leninist” moment of the revolution was different from the era of Stalin and that post-Stalinist Soviet communism also developed many important peculiarities. But, in Strada's view, all of these stages are nothing more than logical passages of the same abstract idea in a historical context, which changes under the great impact of abstract ideas.

According to this image of Soviet history as an unwinding skein, Strada emphatically rejected any interpretation of the revolution's course in terms of a degeneration of a good idea: Leninism had been totalitarian since its very emergence. In a similar way, Stalinism didn't represent a betrayal of the revolution:

In the turning point of 1929, in the “top-down revolution” which Stalin hurled down, there wasn't anything “Thermidorian,” nor was there a weakening of the revolutionary spirit, but, on the contrary, a relaunch and, at the same time, a metamorphosis of the very premise; a throw-back to the age of civil war and war communism, a criminal extremism directed against the archenemy of revolutionaries, the peasantry.¹⁸

Not dissimilarly, after Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev didn't want to establish “communism with a human face,” which is an oxymoron. Khrushchev, “Stalinist due to his education and shared responsibility, but ex-Stalinist due to his beliefs and advantages,”¹⁹ was not driven by anti-totalitarian principles. He wished to “bring the communist system back to the life, in the same way that (albeit in a clumsy and desperate way) Gorbachev did, under different circumstances, when the system was by then badly decomposed from an economical and ideological point of view.”

But there is more to it. In the last years of his life, the Italian scholar underscored that there is a road which lead from Marx to Stalin, although the steps which this path is made up of are not linked by deterministic causality.²⁰ The goal of communism contains the seed, so to speak, of a totalitarian project: “the final goal” of Marxism, “a communist and homogenous society,” is “totalitarian in its essence, and it is perfectly coherent with the means of its implementation.”²¹

As for the concept of totalitarianism, Strada reiterated on a number of occasions that it was quite useful. It defines a new kind of political power that is characteristic of the 20th century. The common roots of leftwing and rightwing totalitarianism is “the denial not only of liberal democracy, but of the very historical conditions of its emergence,” specifically “the modern and bourgeois

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁸ V. Strada, *Autoritratto autocritico...*, p. 110.

¹⁹ V. Strada, *Lenin Stalin Putin...*, p. 50.

²⁰ V. Strada, *URSS–Russia. Letteratura e storia tra passato e presente*, Milano 1985, pp. 399–423.

²¹ V. Strada, *Lenin Stalin Putin...*, p. 122.

society of individuals, which totalitarian ideologies propose to replace with an utopian, collectivist community. Each totalitarianism defines that community in its own terms.”²²

According to Strada, it is not because of the intrinsic and unquestionable problems that this category — moreso than others — continues to display, that it struggled to make its way in the political and academic world. This happened only because of the comparison between fascist regimes and communism, which a large part of the left wing have considered for decades to be outrageous, a pure ideological expression of the “cold war.” On the contrary, Strada observed that it is precisely this denial to be a product of the “cold war,” because “censorship in the communist regimes forbade the use of the word ‘totalitarian’ if it was applied to themselves, while they tolerated this word referring to fascist regimes, with which they wanted to avoid any possible comparison.”²³

Discussing Pipes and Brzeziński’s theses

After these few general considerations, we can go into details of Strada’s reflections on two specific elements of Pipes’s and Brzeziński’s works.

We can begin with Pipes, because he was the first of the two to be taken into consideration by Strada. The Italian scholar intervened in the dispute between Solzhenitsyn, who had wanted to defend “the innocence of Russia” and considered Russian communism just as an “imported product,” and Pipes, who has “inclined to underscore the continuity of the USSR and the anti-liberal and authoritarian tradition of the pre-revolutionary Russian state.”²⁴ Strada’s point of view was, in this case, a midpoint between Pipes and Solzhenitsyn’s judgment. The Italian scholar indeed agreed with the Russian writer in considering that “to dump on the Russian past the responsibility of Soviet totalitarianism” is deeply wrong.²⁵

In another of his works, Strada wrote that communism was a global phenomenon, and that we need to judge the contemporary history of Russia in light of this fact. In this respect, according to the Italian scholar, the attempt to separate the history of western and eastern communism, as if they belonged to different realities, was historically and conceptually unfounded.²⁶

²² V. Strada, “Totalitarismo, totalitarismi,” [in:] *Totalitarismo e totalitarismi*, ed. V. Strada, Venezia 2003, p. 81. This book contains the proceedings of the International Conference *Illuminismo e totalitarismo. Russia e Italia: due storiografie a confronto* that Strada organized in Venice, 5–7 April 2001.

²³ V. Strada, “Totalitarismo, totalitarismi,” p. 79.

²⁴ V. Strada, *URSS–Russia...*, p. 194. Strada refers to R. Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, London 1974.

²⁵ V. Strada, *URSS–Russia...*, p. 195.

²⁶ V. Strada, *Lenin Stalin Putin...*, pp. 12, 110.

On the other hand, Strada agreed with Pipes and disagreed with Solzhenitsyn, because "the western Marxist revolutionary spirit doesn't explain why communism took place precisely in Russia."²⁷ Despotism as a century-old tradition of political power; the weakness of a civil society; the economic backwardness due to the "peasant question;" the ideological backwardness "which was manifested, in the conservative circles, in the belief of a spiritual superiority — especially, in sphere of religion — of Russia over the West, and, in the progressive circles, in the trust in a specific, if not unique, way of development;"²⁸ these, for Strada, were some of the most relevant aspects that laid the groundwork for the victory of Bolsheviks in Russia.

A different but inevitably related question concerns Strada's reflections on Zbigniew Brzeziński's work. In this case, we move from the history of communism to the concept of totalitarian dictatorship.

As we observed above, Strada held a favorable opinion of the concept of totalitarianism, because he strongly believed in the usefulness and necessity of the comparison between the totalitarian regimes and ideologies, and more specifically between communism and Nazism, since he pointed out that fascism was a *sui generis* form of totalitarianism, also due to the compromises that it made with the pre-existing institutions.²⁹

Strada appreciated the attempts of Friedrich and Brzeziński to refine the abstract ideal type of totalitarian dictatorship with its six characteristic points of the "totalitarian syndrome."³⁰ But, at the same time, he didn't consider this concept fully satisfying, like, in more general terms, other classifications elaborated by political science. As an historian, Strada believed that in this field the historical method was definitely superior to the method carried out by political science: "the concept of totalitarianism is essentially either historical or impossible, and any definition originating in political science is useful only in the historical research and in support of it, like any other general concept."³¹

According to Strada, one of the most relevant problems that the studies on totalitarian ideologies and regimes grounded in historical research have unearthed is the unique status of communism, specifically of Soviet communism, because it was the only totalitarianism which encompassed the stages of birth, development, fall and death by natural causes, and in effect the only truly realized totalitarianism in world history.

For this reason it is very difficult, although not impossible, to compare Soviet communism to other communist regimes which were almost universally

²⁷ V. Strada, *URSS–Russia...*, p. 196.

²⁸ V. Strada, *Il dovere di uccidere...*, pp. 42–43.

²⁹ V. Strada, *Totalitarismo e storia*, p. 98.

³⁰ V. Strada, "Archeologia della rivoluzione d'Ottobre," [in:] *Autoritratto autocritico...*, p. 218. In this case, the Italian scholar is obviously referring to J.C. Friedrich, Z. Brzeziński, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, New York 1956.

³¹ V. Strada, *Archeologia della rivoluzione d'Ottobre*, p. 218.

imported and imposed from abroad — in many cases, from the USSR — but also to Nazism, a terrifying and repulsive regime, the life of which was fortunately brief and that, by virtue of that fact, didn't develop its totalitarian character in the long term. Nazi totalitarianism, so linked to the "figure of Hitler and embodied in the German situation," seems, in comparison with communism, "secondary and ephemeral;" while communist totalitarianism was "large and permanent," lasting three generations, "encompassing every sphere from the economy to religion [...]" with a vastness that it derived from the Marxist doctrine: in respect of which Hitler's international and racial Darwinism looks horrifyingly miserable."³²

This is the reason why communism should be looked at "the only totalitarianism you can know in the entirety of its extent, the only one that is really original and native, the only which created its own, long-lasting style. And the only one that, among other things, left an undying heritage" that is "a characteristically totalitarian bureaucracy, called *nomenklatura*, which, having understood the terminal illness of the system, prepared to outlast it, in a 'capitalistic' and 'democratic' guise."³³

Conclusions

We have now established how Vittorio Strada, expanding upon Richard Pipes's thesis about the preservation of a czarist, authoritarian spirit and corresponding institutions in the Soviet state and Brzeziński's and Friedrich's refinement of the well-known concept of totalitarianism, perfected his own interpretation of Soviet communism and in turn made the method more useful to analyze totalitarian systems and ideologies.

Strada's remarks should not be perceived as an absolute rejection of the aforementioned aspects of communist totalitarianism pointed out by Brzeziński and Pipes in their works, but should be interpreted as a fundamental stage of the Italian scholar's long-term research into totalitarianism, and an important occasion for developing his original interpretation of totalitarian ideologies.

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