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THE MORAL CONSERVATIVE WAYBACK MACHINE AND THE DEEPER SENSE OF THE CLOSURE OF *MEMORIAL*

by [Kristina Stoeckl](#) | [български](#) | [ქართული](#) | [ελληνικά](#) | [Română](#) | [Русский](#) | [Српски](#)



The identification of moral conservatives in the twenty-first century with historical periods that predate the experience of twentieth century totalitarianism reveals a fundamental blind-spot in contemporary conservatism. Conjuring up political constellations of the 1920s to 40s as analogies for contemporary struggles between conservatives and progressives willfully ignores the ‘lesson’ of totalitarianism. Nothing exemplifies this forgetfulness better than the recent closure of *Memorial*, the NGO dedicated to the critical memory of Stalinism, by Russian authorities.

On the pages of *Public Orthodoxy*, Aram G. Sarkisian recently pointed out the odd affinity which some American Orthodox cultivate vis-à-vis the time of the [American Civil War](#) and how ultraconservative Orthodox groups appropriate an eighteenth-century story to fit a twisted and ahistorical agenda of the twenty-first. The identification with past epochs is nothing unique to American Orthodox. In my own studies of moral conservatism in Russia and the US, I have also encountered this identification with the past, in particular with the period of the 1920s to 40s.

For instance, Allan C. Carlson, the founder of the World Congress of Families, has singled out the Sweden of the 1940s and early 50s as his preferred period and model state. In an [interview](#) I conducted with him, Carlson explains his interest in two Swedish social democratic reformers of the 1940s, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal:

“I learned to think about family policy from the Myrdals, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal in



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Sweden. There was a tension in their work [...] Alva Myrdal started off as a socialist feminist and atheist and internationalist. Gunnar Myrdal, there was always a conservative tug to him, which I didn't fully understand, even when I met him and interviewed him a number of times. But ten years after his death, they released papers. A box of his earliest papers. Which showed that as a young man – and I'm talking about somebody at age 18 or 19 – he was not a social democrat. In fact, he was an extreme rightwing young man. God, soil, country, pro-aristocracy, he opposed women's suffrage, he was a strong Swedish nationalist Christian. [...] Their program for pronatalist, pro-marriage policies reflects a kind of moderate Swedish nationalism."

Carlson wrote several books in which he hails the Swedish welfare state of the 1940s and 1950s, and condemns what became of it under the spell of "leftist" reforms. The Swedish case allowed Carlson to construct a narrative according to which the European Christian nation-states were gradually taken over by what he calls a "radical leftism", leading to an abolition of the strong nation state (via the the EU) and to the disintegration of the traditional social and moral fabric of society. This powerful narrative is shared by many actors on the right in Europe and has gained considerable traction in new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe. But it is deeply flawed. I will point out the flaw after my next two examples.

In his [speech](#) to the 18th annual meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Vladimir Putin drew a historical comparison between the 1920s and today, comparing advocates of gender equality and rights pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity with Bolshevik revolutionaries:

"In a number of Western countries, the debate over men's and women's rights has turned into a perfect phantasmagoria. Look, beware of going where the Bolsheviks once planned to go—not only communalizing chickens, but also communalizing women. One more step and you will be there [...] this is nothing new; in the 1920s, the so-called Soviet Kulturtraeger also invented some newspeak believing they were creating a new consciousness and changing values that way."

Putin conjures up a contemporary "red scare" in order to recommend *his* Russia built on Orthodoxy, traditional values and military power as alternative model. "Beware of going there" is addressed to the foreign participants in the Valdai Discussion Club. You Westerners, he is saying, you think that you won the Cold War and defeated communism, but you don't see that you now have communism in rainbow colors. The true winner of the Cold War, this is the essence of his message, is Russia.

The copyright on this idea is held not by Putin, but by [Rod Dreher](#), who wrote an entire book in order to argue that those on the liberal and progressive side in today's culture wars are just like Bolshevik [revolutionaries](#) and that religious conservatives are the new dissidents in our era. The book cover of his *Live Not By Lies* invokes a red pillage of churches in a distinctly 1920s constructivist iconography.

Why is the identification with the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s so significant for twenty-first century conservatism?

The interwar period was a time of struggle between communism and anti-communism. The communist agenda comprised internationalism, class-struggle, militant atheism, and radical social ideas. The anti-communist agenda bundled together nationalism, corporatism, restoration, and religious conservatism. Both political ideologies—communism and anti-communism—historically gave rise to forms of totalitarianism: Stalinism in the East and Fascism and Nazism in the West.

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Without wanting to gloss over the differences between these two forms of totalitarianism, I nonetheless consider it legitimate to follow (in more detail [here](#)) the analyses by Hannah Arendt in her *Report on the Banality of Evil*, Jacob Talmon in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, and Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* in order to define a common core of the totalitarian experience. This core includes the recognition that the totalitarian regimes, whether from the left or from the right, did not signify the collapse of the modern political order, but, on the contrary, realized what were among political modernity's intrinsic possibilities: absolutization of community and coercive perfectionist individualism intertwined and produced regimes of terror. Absolute inclusion (in the party, the nation, the Aryan race) produced absolute exclusion (of the bourgeoisie and peasants, of foreigners, of Jews); those excluded were in turn included in faceless collectives (in the camps, in the GULag) and perished, alone. Terror rarely produced solidarity. While millions of persons perished, the Christian Churches failed in front of the challenge, becoming both victims and collaborators. The "lesson" of totalitarianism is that under conditions of utmost ideological polarization, no-one is safe nor saved. The ideological polarization of the 1920s, 30s and 40s produced terror from the left and from the right.

Why, then, is the identification with the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s so significant for twenty-first century conservatism? One could dismiss it as merely rhetorical. After all, we live in 2021, the Cold War ended in 1991, not even China is communist any longer, what is the problem if some people continue to kick the anti-communist ball after playoff? I don't see it this way. The identification with the time *before* the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century allows conservative actors to ignore the lesson of totalitarianism: under conditions of utmost ideological polarization, no-one is safe nor saved.

Western European politics in the second half of the twentieth century were determined by this lesson. European political leaders like Jean Monnet or Robert Schuman, who forged the European Union, were not perfectionists. They were skillful in finding middle ways, half solutions and compromises. Also the Christian Churches in Western Europe chose the path of epistemic humility and started to act as sparring partners of the democratic state, giving up on the aspiration to take it over.

The identification of the leadership of the World Congress of Families, of Vladimir Putin and of Rod Dreher with the anti-communists of the past is – apart from hilarious in the case of Putin—haunted by a double historical blind spot: first they ignore the totalitarian potential on the right, and second, they ignore the fact that terror is born by ideological polarization. In their re-imagined 1920s struggle, they ignore the lesson of totalitarianism.

In Russia, the closure by court degree of the organization *Memorial* on 28 December 2021 is fully in line with the conservative wayback machine. *Memorial's* work does not fit the desired historical narrative, because it insists on the lived reality of totalitarianism that marked the middle of the twentieth century. What the countless personal stories stored in the *Memorial* archives amount to is the lesson that good intentions can bear evil, that victims may turn into perpetrators and perpetrators into victims, that a politics that professes the collective produces the absolute atomized individual, that claims to absolute truth bear lies, and that people, churches, and institutions are almost never immune to corruption. *Memorial's* archives teach us that people are rarely safe nor saved and that utmost ideological polarization produces terror.

By closing *Memorial*, Russian authorities will not silence this lesson of totalitarianism, but they make it harder for Russians and for people in the world to hear it. The deeper sense behind the closure of *Memorial* is the wish to hark back to a time when the world was polarized between internationalism, class-struggle, militant atheism, and radical social ideas, on the one hand, and nationalism, corporatism, restoration, and religious conservatism, on the other, and when people did not yet know what this constellation would give rise to: Stalinism, Fascism, Nazism. But today we know. The members of the Christian Churches that picked up the pieces after their failures

under the totalitarian regimes, they also know. Wayback machines are dangerous tools, on all sides of politics. We must be wary of them.

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