Modernity and Brutality in Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany

As a result of World War I, change spread like wildfire throughout Europe. There was a movement towards modernity that would not only be seen in combat on the battlefield, but would also translate into all aspects of society including politics and governments treatment of civilians. After the close of The Great War, the world saw the rise of two dictators that used their power to terrify their subjects into order. The books *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* by Marion A. Kaplan and *Journey into the Whirlwind* by Eugina Semyonovna Ginzburg bring to light what living under this type of rule was like. Josef Stalin of the communist Soviet Union and Adolf Hitler of fascist Nazi Germany introduced regimes to the world that demonstrated a sense of modernity as well as complete brutality. Within their own countries internal enemies were defined. Despite the dehumanization and mechanization of imprisonment and killing of these "enemies", in both states those persecuted held on to a false sense of hope that their imprisonment was a mistake, and the government would correct itself. Additionally, in these regimes women saw a reversal of gender norms, although German women were urged to spend more time in traditional roles than women in the Soviet Union. However, the most significant of the difference between Russia and Germany at this time was ideology. These regimes were like nothing the world had seen before, and many would die because of them.

In the First World War, internal enemies were typically not members of a state: they were outsiders. An example of this was in South Tyrol at Trentino and Alto-Adige. The villagers in these towns were seen as Italian internal enemies because these villages were taken from the Austria-Hungarian Empire and forced to fight on the other side of the war. As a result, the men were rounded up and sent off to war and the women and children were moved off the land and put in refugee camps.[1] This was not how internal enemies would be classified, or treated, in Stalin's and Hitler's regimes. Under these modern rules internal enemies Jews in Germany and those that that were seen as resistors in the Soviet Union came from inside the state. Jews have a history of being persecuted throughout Europe long before the rise of fascism in Germany. In fact, Jews in Germany at this time had been well integrated into society and identified themselves as German.[2] In the memoirs of German Jews the phrases, "'we were so German,' 'we were so assimilated,' 'we were so middle class,'" are seen over and over again in firsthand accounts.[3] Even though many Jewish men had fought for Germany in the First World War, when Hitler came to power they were not considered part of the community, or *Volksgemeinschaft* which can best be defined as 'the racial community'. This is because they were not considered a part of society and they were not considered German.[4] In the Soviet Union, many of those condemned by Stalin's purges, like Eugina Ginzburg as she describes in her memoir, were active communists and party members. Not all Jews had actually committed crimes against the government, many like

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[1] Professor Ebner, "War without Moral Limits and the Brutalization of European Society." (lecture, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, September 9, 2013).

[2] Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[3] Kaplan, 5.

[4] Ibid, 4.

Ginzburg were guilty by association. She was officially charged with "relaxation of vigilance" and accused of "collaborating with enemies of the police."[5] In both states, the enemy was within the state and it was of the utmost importance to the regimes that these internal enemies be dealt with and eliminated.

In both states, those persecuted experienced a social death, in which they were cut off from society and culture. German citizens were unprepared for what the Nazis wanted to ultimately accomplish by exterminating all of the Jews. The state's philosophy for doing so first began with killing them socially, which they did by attacking "their political rights, economic livelihoods, and social relationships."[6] This idea of social death had a larger impact on the men in Nazi Germany than it did on the women. For one, women did not have jobs as Hitler urged them to return to more traditional roles and produce healthy Aryan children to help the master race grow, which was a key principle in Nazi ideology. On the other hand, the men were much more active in society, and had real ties to Germany. Jewish men identified first and foremost as German, not as Jews, and many that fought in the First World War were still decorated.[7] Additionally, it can be argued that the women were thinking more about necessity, their families, and survival. Jewish men on the other hand were too proud to leave. German-Jewish men were educated and held important positions in society, and had done this despite the anti- Semitic society.[8] It was not clear at the time what the outcome for the Jews would be, but the men weighed the pros and cons and it was a trying decision whether it was worth leaving Germany and giving up everything that they had worked hard for. It is for these reasons that generally the women pushed to leave Germany as the legislation and treatment towards Jews over the course of time became more restrictive, demoralizing, and dehumanizing. It was similar in the Soviet Union, but not to the same degree. When Eugina Ginzburg was being targeted as an internal enemy before her imprisonment, those that were her friends and colleagues started to break ties until they no longer interacted with her with fear of being targeted themselves.[9] This social death contributed to the pain of being ostracized by one's country. It was not only the fear for oneself and for one's immediate family, but also unintentionally hurting one's family and friends by association.

These internal enemies were treated in a brutal and dehumanizing manner in Germany and Russia. After spending a great deal of her sentence in a series of prison cells, Ginzburg's passage from the prison to the work camps was seen as refreshing. This was in part because not only was her treatment while in the prisons less than humane, but while in prison fresh air was hard to come by. In her interrogation she had gone without food or sleep, which Ginzburg referred to as being on a conveyor belt.[10] However, it was her brutal treatment in prison that was a characteristic of this regime. Not only were the women not excused from punishment, but they were questioned for hours, which Ginzburg confirms. In one case a woman of high stature was beaten. This dehumanization would also be seen in her transportation to the gulag. The relatively healthy and strong women were loaded on to cattle cars, packed in there like animals and shipped across the Soviet Union, in a journey

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[5] Eugina Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*. (New York: Harvest, 1967), 33.
[6] Kaplan, 3.
[7] Ginzburg.
[8] Kaplan, 5.
[9] Ginzburg.
[10] Ibid, 83.

that not many would survive.[11] This dehumanization and brutality was also present in Germany in the way in which the German Jews were treated. While the Jewish women were physically spared from the beginning of the ostracizing and social death, men on the other hand were seen as a greater threat and beaten regularly. After the Pogrom in November 1938, these men that were horribly treated were now forced into concentration camps, where they would barely be fed, and worked to death. It was a transition from social death to actual death.[12] The men, and eventually women, were treated much like cattle; the government, "herded Jews together, tagging them and compelling them to do forced labor."[13] The brutality and dehumanization that these internal enemies were treated with is a common theme during this era, and would characterize these two regimes.

It is most surprising that despite the dehumanization and the persecution that these internal enemies faced that many people in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union held onto this false sense of hope, not only for their survival, but also in their regime. Ginzburg has complete faith in the communist system until there is a knock at her door, and still believes in it after her imprisonment, although she did not have a favorable view of Stalin. Before her arrest she said, "I would have obeyed without the slightest hesitation. I had not the shadow of a doubt of the rightness of the party line. Only Stalin…I could not bring myself to idolize."[14] Until their arrest and deportation Jews in Germany had a very similar attitude. "Jewish daily life also shows that, despite the abundant deprivations and humiliations, until November 1938 the majority of Jews attempted to adjust, to the new circumstances."[15] This is part of the reason Jewish men were reluctant to leave Germany until it was too late. From a modern day perspective, it is amazing to think that despite all the hardship these people faced because of their governments, these people kept an optimistic outlook and still believed in their regimes to some extent. Maybe it was the best they could do to survive.

With all the men being sent off to war, women were forced to enter the workforce to keep the economy alive during The Great War, and the modern woman was created. It was said that, "women drew upon tenacity they didn't know they had."[16] This type of woman would not disappear after the end of the war, and the characteristics of a modern woman would be present in both Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany. However the roles the women played were different in each country. In Stalin's communist Russia women such as Eugina Ginzburg played an active role in daily life and were not spared from the purges. Ginzburg was a mother as well as a well-respected professor at a university involved in journals and publications and was an active member of the communist party. At the height of Stalin's purges, she was persecuted by Stalin's regime for her interaction with a colleague that was deemed an anti-communist.[17] However, she did not lose hope in her beloved political system and did not sit by idly. She went to fight for herself and prove her innocence by meeting with party officials often without the presence of her husband and she expected to be taken seriously. Ginzburg's actions can earn her a title as a modern

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[11] Ibid, 279.
[12] Kaplan, 184.
[13] Kaplan, 145.
[14] Ginzburg, 3.
[15] Kaplan, 5.
[16] Kaplan, 60.
[17] Ginzburg,

woman, just as the equal punishment of men and women by the regime is truly a modern philosophy. Much was similar in Hitler's Germany. It was up to the strong Jewish women to protect their German families. While German men were beaten in the streets, the Jewish women were spared from physical abuse at first. It was because of this that the "women took on new roles – interceding for their men with the police, the tax offices, and the landlord – while continuing older patterns of mediating for their families in the neighborhood, at the grocery, or in the schools."[18] Although, once the women arrived in the death camps, they were seen as weak and were the first to be killed. Gender divisions ran deep in Nazi Germany and even though women ran the house and in their time of need protected their men, they were seen as weaker and therefore were the first to be killed.

Although there are clear similarities between the two governments of Hitler and Stalin, these two regimes were by no means the same. The main difference was ideology: Germany was fascist and the Soviet Union was communist. This difference in ideology was influential when discussing internal enemies. Fascist ideology was driven by race, and the Nazis viewed the Jews as an inferior race. They 'became the scapegoats for all social and economic and ills," as they were blamed for the loss of the First World War, and it was up to Hitler to restore that sense of pre-war greatness.[19] In the Soviet Union, the persecution of comrades was driven by Marxist ideology. Part of Marxist ideology is centered around an uprising of the masses and class struggle. Eugina Ginzburg was considered top of the food chain by Marxist benchmarks. Her husband had a fairly high standing in the communist party, and Eugina herself was educated and a professor at a university.[20] It was part of Marxist ideology that there be no upper class or elites, and this is what Stalin hoped to achieve by purging the Soviet state.

Both the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union showed striking similarities despite their differences in ideologies. Both Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany saw a break from not only morality but from the law, one of the defining characteristics of a modern regime. However it was the brutality, the dehumanization, and the reversal of gender roles that also helped to demonstrate these regimes as not only modern but similar in certain ways despite their very different ideologies. These reversals in normal thought and contemporary characteristics came about because of the First World War and the themes would carry over through the interwar years, through the rule of these brutal and modern regimes and their leaders.

[18] Kaplan, 17.
[19] Kaplan, 13.
[20] Ginzburg, 3.