

Rituals, Propaganda, and Social Regulation: Totalism as a Quasi-Religious System

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61577/SN.2022.2.22> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV
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Recent scholarship on mass mobilization and totalism has approached propaganda as a solution to political cooperation, whereby inflammatory speeches, mis- or dis-information, and rumors function not to persuade audiences but rather to coordinate coalitions. Propaganda, it has been argued, aligns the attention of individuals already disposed to conflict. However, propaganda does not operate in a vacuum. Here we argue that movements and regimes that contend for total political power do so by employing a combination of propaganda and ritual. Rituals function to sanctify, connect individuals, and signal commitments. Further, rituals bind individuals into emerging social orders that enable the very communication of propaganda as a means of coordinating coalitions and instantiating methods for coercing behaviors. By examining historical case studies of totalism, we provide an exploration of ritual in totalist regimes and thereby argue that totalism is a quasi-religious system that employs elements of religion in an attempt to regulate social behavior. In describing totalism as a quasi-religious system, we outline five phases in the life course of totalist movements: preformation, cadre formation, coalitional building, collective power, and breakdown. Totalism ultimately results in considerable negative effects on the population, such as loss of health, material resources, and social trust, and closes important channels for socioecological feedback, which are essential for the proper functioning of any system. Accordingly, unlike most religious systems, totalism over-sanctifies power, overregulates meanings, and fails to achieve cooperation and coordination beyond cadres or coalitions of enthusiasts. Consequently, totalist movements are relatively short-lived compared to successful religions.

Keywords: ritual, propaganda, totalism, religious systems

How to cite: Kiper, J., Sosis, R. (2022). Rituals, Propaganda, and Social Regulation: Totalism as a Quasi-Religious System. *Slovenský národopis*, 70(2), 273–296.
<https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.2.22>

Introduction

This article centers on three subjects that are rarely discussed together: rituals, propaganda, and social regulation (for an exception, see Atran, 2011; Talmont-Kaminski, 2013). Although it might not seem so at first glance, they concern similar behaviors, the collective products of which are often linked in human social worlds because they functionally operate together within religious systems. The dynamic interrelationships between rituals, propaganda, and social regulation in religious systems can powerfully and effectively influence individuals and shape human societies.

Here, our focus is not on religious systems as such, but rather on totalism, which we argue can be productively viewed as a quasi-religious system. Totalism is widely understood as any social movement, political or military faction, or governmental regime that imposes an all-or-nothing emotional alignment behind its ideology, and whose leaders, when exercising authority, attempt to exert unrestricted power (Lifton, 2014 [1961]). Totalism thus includes authoritarian, totalitarian, and dictatorial practices. Whether expressed as a movement or a regime, totalism often functions like a religious system, but we will argue that it is more accurately described as a quasi-religious system that employs rituals and propaganda to maintain social regulation. For the sake of brevity, we do not intend to offer a definitive typology for all cases of totalism, nor a list of necessary constituents that comprise totalism in every historical circumstance. Moreover, we do not wish to suggest that religious systems and totalism are mutually exclusive – since religious systems can be totalistic and vice versa. Also, we shall bracket some of the more complicated entanglements found at the union of religion and totalism, such as the degree to which states with state religions are totalistic or whether recent anti-colonial movements were religious or totalistic. Our focus instead will be on totalist systems in modern secular states which are not *prima facie* religious. In so doing, our primary goal is to offer a preliminary exploration of the role of ritual in such totalist regimes. Our secondary goal is to demonstrate, with the help of historical examples, such as the former Yugoslavia, where we have regional expertise, that evolutionary considerations of totalism as a quasi-religious system can shed light on how totalist-movements function and sustain their influence.

That said, the main points to our discussion will be as follows. Totalism, as defined above, evolves socially in distinct stages. From its formative stage to coalitional building, totalist movements use rituals much like religious systems do: to signal commitments among adherents and to sanctify ideologies and actions. Totalist movements also use propaganda to indoctrinate adherents when forming cadres of highly dedicated adherents and to coordinate emerging coalitions, as well as to instantiate methods for coercing people's behaviors. However, once a totalist movement – or faction – becomes a regime, its authorities are faced with the challenge of regulating the behaviors of large populations. This is regularly done through expressions of power such as communication-rituals and reading-between-the-lines

propaganda, and ultimately reversals of meanings that are undertaken through a regime's discourse such as its use of metaphor. Yet, given the aggressive top-down nature of these expressions, totalist regimes typically fail to sustain cooperation. For unlike most enduring religious systems, authorities in totalist systems routinely over-sanctify power and attempt to control meanings through power. The result is not only negative effects on the population such as loss of health, material resources, and social trust, but also that authorities close themselves off to channels that would otherwise offer socioecological feedback for the proper functioning of the system. Accordingly, many contemporary totalist systems consistently have a shortened longevity compared to most religious systems.

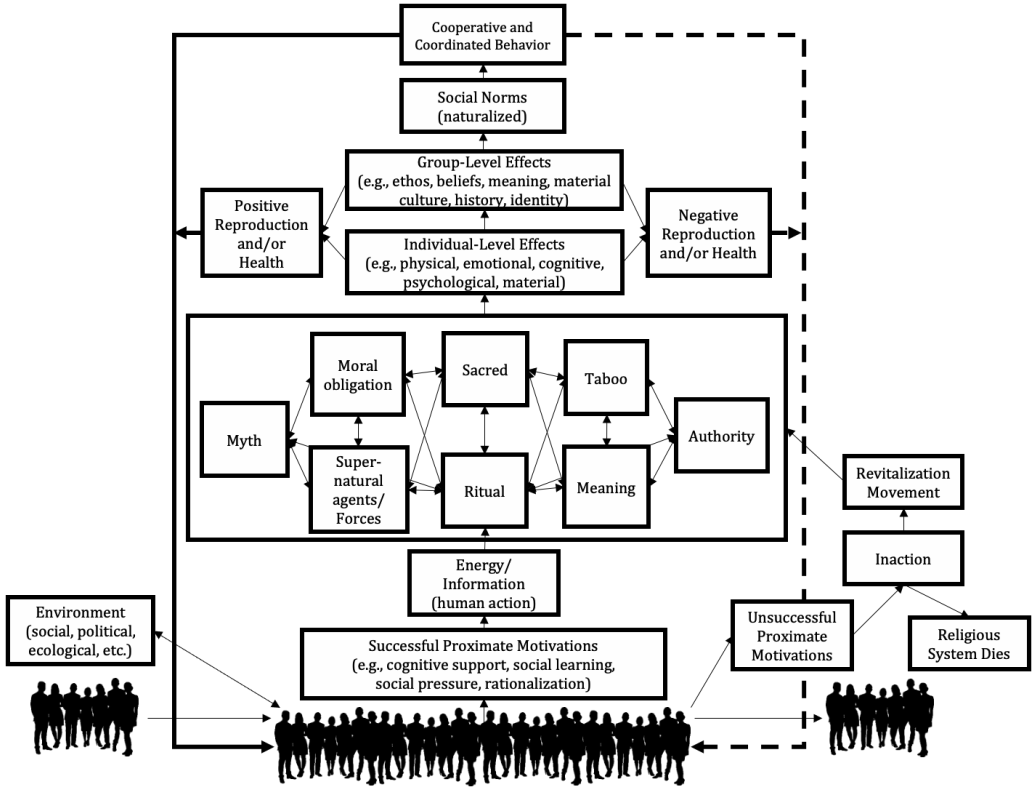
Religion as a complex adaptive system

According to Sosis and colleagues (for a review, see Sosis, 2019), religions are manifested from socially engaged individuals who are influenced by external factors, such as the ecological, economic, social, and religious environment. As a cultural system, religions require energy and information to function, which is provided by ritual (Sosis, 2016). Ritual performances offer social information about performers and thus establish the central means by which adherents encode social meanings and both signal to and augment trust among adherents, thus promoting cooperation and coordination (Rappaport, 1999). In addition to ritual, religious systems are comprised of seven other interacting elements – moral obligations, myths, taboos, authorities, supernatural agency beliefs, meaning, and sacred experiences – that, although integrated across systems today, have independent phylogenetic histories. Though all these elements can interact with each other in any religion, they all interact with ritual in every functioning religious system (Sosis, 2020: 144–145). These elements are the building blocks of religion, and they are held together through language. Indeed, the religious system is inconceivable without it. Linguistic discourse serves to indicate the moral obligations conveyed in ritual performance, describe unseen supernatural agents, articulate prohibited behaviors, reveal myths, proscribe taboos, justify authorities, and construct meaning (Sosis, 2019).

Besides the eight core interacting elements, religions produce multiple layers of effects. The most immediate involve a complex set of developmental, neurological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral traits (Sosis, 2016). These are the internal effects of religion, experienced by individuals. When these experiences are shared by the others in the religious community they contribute to group-level effects, such as a collective material culture, historical memory, identity, network of symbolic meanings, and ethos. Here again, rituals are the key. Rituals naturalize group-level effects and the social norms that emerge from them, generating community-level cooperation and coordination. Because these effects are integrated and exist in a social environment, they yield feedback (Sosis, 2020). If rituals are performed and cohere with other core elements, then information and energy in the system are likely

to be sustained. If rituals are not performed or are not cohesive with other elements, then proximate motivations to participate in the rituals themselves decreases. When this happens, the system experiences negative feedback and requires revitalization or will cease to exist (Ibid.: 145).

Figure 1
Religious System



Note. The religious system as an adaptive system. From *Religion Evolving: Cultural, Cognitive, and Ecological Dynamics* (p. 153), by B. Purzycki and R. Sosis, 2022, Equinox Publishing. © 2022 by Benjamin Purzycki and Richard Sosis. Reprinted with permission.

The main takeaway from understanding religions as adaptive systems is this. Cooperative and coordinated group behavior serves as the basis for feedback, as experienced by individuals. If group cooperation and coordination is successful, then people experience positive effects, such as good health and reproductive opportunities, and thus feel motivated to continue participating in the system’s rituals. In this manner, they indirectly provide energy and information for the system itself. However, if a system fails to generate cooperation and coordination, people experience negative effects and therefore experience few proximate motivations to continue engaging in ritual, thus depriving the system of the energy and information it needs to survive.

Totalism

As of this writing, most of the world's political systems are authoritarian or sliding toward dictatorial, totalitarian, or fascistic rulership. Equally alarming, longstanding democracies are experiencing a noticeable uptick in anti-democratic movements, such as populist authoritarianism, political extremism, violent factionalism, and terrorism (Repucci, Slipowitz, 2022). This has raised two questions. Why is totalitarianism a reoccurring threat in modern secular nation states, and how do totalist movements and regimes in the contemporary period build support and coordinate coalitions, often manufacturing dangerous regimes?

The first question has received considerable attention (e.g., Frantz, 2018; Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018; Stanley, 2016), but our focus is on the second question, which has received considerably less attention. We use the term “totalism” to describe a variety of groups, ranging from extremist movements to totalitarian regimes, whose modus operandi is rebuffing democratic, liberal standards and striving towards unrestricted power, usually over subjects (see Lifton, 2014 [1961]: 129; Taylor, 1993: 85). Yet, as we will show, just who those subjects are – and how power is exercised – varies depending on the context and stage of the totalist system. Totalism is thus taken to be a spectrum: on one end, political extremists strive for submission to an ideology, while somewhere in the middle authoritarians strive for strict obedience to an authority, and, at the furthest end, totalitarians strive to subordinate citizens to the state.

Regardless of its form, totalitarianism commonly begins as a movement or faction comprised of revolutionaries, ideologues, soldiers, or elites (see Koesel, 2014; Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018). Although most fail to develop beyond a cadre of enthusiasts, those whose members coordinate to build effective coalitions can attain considerable power, but usually for a relatively short period of time. This is because totalists face a common set of challenges once they find themselves in power. These include maintaining their political authority, subduing large populations, and controlling other cultural elites. In turn, these challenges pose three respective risks for totalists: removal from power by legal means, popular uprisings to oust leaders, or internal coups that overthrow the regime (Frantz, 2018).

Propaganda

Accordingly, attaining and retaining power are ends in themselves for totalists, whether they explicitly say so or not. What makes totalitarianism so alarming is that totalists, if successful in tapping into broad social sentiments, are often effective at amalgamating power by socially coordinating and coercing populations (Frantz, 2018). But how totalists effectively coerce and coordinate remains an ongoing topic of research (see Frantz, 2018; Koesel, 2014; Paxton, 2004). Most legal and historical accounts agree that one of the main instruments is propaganda.¹ Totalists use

¹ *Propaganda* is taken to mean any deliberate attempt to use communicative information to induce an audience to believe or behave in ways that benefit the propagandist (Jowett, O'Donnell, 2018).

propaganda to exploit people's social conditions, including perceived insecurities, economic crises, political inequalities, longstanding social cleavages, and fears over losing traditions (Leader Maynard, Benesch, 2016). Propagandists use these conditions, which are acute at different times in a nation's history, to manipulate persons, usually by dehumanizing a scapegoated outgroup, into granting authority to totalists and supporting their policies (Haslam, 2006).

Despite its popularity, this argument – which is otherwise known as the manipulation thesis of propaganda – raises an unresolved problem that leads us to ritual and social regulation. How exactly does propaganda regulate social behavior? Scholars have debated this question for over a century (see Jowett, O'Donnell, 2018), yet it has become especially important over the last ten years for contemporary international criminal law, where its practical implication is how to prevent totalists from instigating or inciting violent mass crimes (for a review, see Dojčinović, 2020). The central issue in these cases is a theoretical one: what is it about totalist propaganda that allows its leaders to manipulate audiences?

Leading the way, philosophers like Stanley (2016) have argued that totalist propaganda operates on a *flawed ideology* – or cultural myth – that totalists exploit to manipulate audiences into believing that a totalist's agenda is justified. So, for example, a flawed ideology of collective victimhood is often used to justify totalist demands for subordinating another group (Lancaster, 2016: 374). As we point out below, these flawed ideologies subsume collective memories and cultural scripts (see Wertsch, 2002) which totalists exploit. Psychologists such as Lifton (2014 [1961]) have argued that totalists use a particular set of manipulative-persuasion techniques, such as milieu control (maintaining an echo chamber) and demanding ingroup purity, which we will argue function as ritual practices for cults, violence cadres, and violent political coalitions. Such tactics pressure adherents into conforming to apparent ingroup expectations. Still, others like Arendt (1951) have argued that totalist propaganda, such as mass pageantry or scapegoating, are not to convince the masses of anything other than the totalist's power – a thesis that has been recently defended in empirical investigations of propaganda (e.g., Huang, 2015; Moojman et al., 2018; Pennycook, Rand, 2021).

An alternative thesis is derived from *epistemic vigilance*, which begins from the premise that humans have evolved cognition for evaluating communications and the reputation of communicators (Mercier, 2020). Supporting this observation, recent studies have found that most people recognize inaccurate information, including disinformation, rumors, misinformation, or hate speech, but they sometimes support it anyway for what it does (for a review, see Petersen, 2020). For Petersen (Ibid.), what propaganda does is function as a hard-to-fake or costly signal about one's group affiliation, around which like-minded individuals can form coalitions (see also Huang, DeScioli, Murad, 2021; Van Bavel, Pereira, 2018). Hence, following this line of research, totalist propaganda functions to build coalitions of extremists during critical conditions in a nation's history.

In what follows, we will show that both views – the manipulation thesis and coalitional thesis – accurately describe the communicative information of totalists

but at different stages of totalism. Before getting to those topics, however, we need to stress an additional point. Propaganda is only one of two instruments used by totalists to regulate behavior. The second instrument, which propaganda scholars often overlook, is ritual. By further connecting these concepts, even in a preliminary exploration of ritual in totalist systems, this article contributes to contemporary propaganda studies.

Ritual

As Marquez (2018) observes, propaganda and ritual often go hand in hand, and this is especially true for totalists. By “ritual” we mean the “performance of conventional acts explicitly directed toward the involvement of nonempirical or supernatural agencies in the affairs of participants” (Rappaport, 1968: 191–192). Rituals, whether involving supernatural or non-empirical agencies, such as bygone leaders or postulates lacking evidence-based data, entail what anthropologists describe as “the ties that bind”. As Rappaport (1999) explained, rituals inculcate “the establishment of convention, the sealing of social contract, [and] the construction of the integrated conventional orders we shall call Logoi” (Ibid.: 27). They do so by means of their invariant sequences and utterances that, through public repetition, both encode and communicate an acceptance of a social order, or the cultural logic (implicit rules) for social relations in a context. Put another way, by engaging in performances that are associated with social arrangements or institutions, persons acquire the expected modes for operating within those arrangements or institutions, while also communicating an acceptance of them to others. Accordingly, performing rituals renders practitioners with a mutual understanding of the implicit obligations and customary behaviors associated with a particular social order.²

Consequentially, ritual is a necessary condition for the social construction of reality and therefore a core constituent for any sociocultural system (Berger, Luckman, 1966: 129–147), including totalism. However, totalism differs from other cultural systems in an important way: as reformers, totalists innovate a radical doctrine and urge others to upend a cultural system. Unlike most religious reformers, totalists not only modify existing social orders but often strive to establish entirely new ones – and, therefore, a broad range of rituals are so critical for them. Totalists need rituals to reinforce a new social contract.

Consider, for instance, textbook examples of recent totalists: Bolshevism, Stalinism, Nazism, and ethnonational separatists. These groups, during their time, were inherently reactionary to a prior social order. The same can be said for violent

2 For example, a wedding ceremony involving a couple communicates their acceptance of matrimony, and thereby reaffirms the convention itself, seals a social contract between the wedded partners, and integrates the couple’s new identity into the greater social order. Granted, the couple’s commitment may be hollow, and they may not even believe they are married, but that is beside the point. The ritual is typically enough to instill some seriousness about the commitment and to communicate an acceptance of such to others (Segal, 2009: 74).

anti-globalist at the intersection of totalism and religious systems, such as militant Islamists, white supremacist terrorists, and ethnoreligious nationalists. Accordingly, it appears that totalists often define themselves with respect to overthrowing a prior social order or having done so, and thus striving to fulfill a promise to institute a new social order, usually characterized in utopian terms.

To illustrate further, the Russian Revolution was strongly anti-religious and totalistic, and yet the resulting system was replete with quasi-religious beliefs and rituals from its inception. Bolshevik enthusiasts not only venerated Marxist-Leninism as an evangelical religion with coopted elements of Russian messianism and maximalism, but also instituted quasi-religious rituals for subjects. In his analysis of Marxist-Leninism as a secular religion, Khazanov (2008) found that Bolsheviks carefully elaborated liturgy and rites for holidays that after their seizure of power blurred the lines between religious and political. They also enforced the use of party icons, banners, and portraits in traditional ceremonies for birth, marriage, and funerals. As Heller (1988) reported, after the Bolsheviks, the “Soviet man [was] beset on all sides by rituals, like a wolf surrounded by hunters” (as cited in Khazanov, 2008: 133). In other words, political rituals became the main technology for Bolsheviks to maintain party commitments and proof thereof.

Granted, the Bolsheviks are at the furthest end of the totalitarian spectrum, but they share many things in common with other totalists. Totalists of all stripes demand costly behaviors from their adherents. Whether it is committing time and energy to the movement, providing financial support, submitting to it, or engaging in violence on its behalf, totalism is costly. For regulating such costly behavior, propaganda – and doctrines or beliefs in general – are not enough (see Sosis, Kiper, 2014). Equally important, when totalists succeed in overthrowing an existing social order, they must not only introduce a new order but also exercise political control over a relatively large population who may not support their agenda. This renders totalism more costly than most other reformative movements.

For these reasons, totalists depend on rituals. They reinforce social conventions, instill moral obligations, and communicate totalists’ ultimate sacred postulates or foundational truths that are non-derivative, seemingly hold everywhere, transcendent, and part of not only the social but also the cosmic order (Rappaport, 1999). Nonetheless, rituals are double-edged swords for totalists. Because efficacious rituals have a social history and appear timeless, enacting new ones is inherently risky – for they can fail, if not backfire against the intentions of the authority’s imposing them (Stark, Finke, 2000). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, totalists enact rituals that usually coopt, mimic, or function to repress rituals from a parent religion, or the most common religious system for a culture (Singh, 2014). They can be summarized as follows:

- Ritual cooption for totalists involves *ritual governance*. This is when a secular act, such as the inauguration of a totalist leader, is made religious, or when religious rituals, such as traditional folk holidays, are made political. Cooption

can also involve nationalizing religious rituals that were once outside the political sphere, such as the commemoration of martyrdom or leaders that were once only celebrated by subcultures of extremists (Koesel, 2014; Schleutker, 2021; Singh, 2014; Yabanci, Taleski, 2018).

- Mimicry of a parent religion typically involves the appropriation of religion at the national level, or its repression in place of an ideology that mimics it. For example, Soviet Russia outlawed religion but appropriated schemas from Orthodox Christianity to portray Lenin's writings as scripture, Lenin's body as a saintly relic, and even Marxism as a new theology (Khazanov, 2008: 122).
- Repressing religion often occurs by *strategic de-ritualization* or the elimination of rituals from a parent religion. A good example was the Khmer Rouge, whose leaders strategically de-ritualized small-scale Buddhist rituals, such as wedding ceremonies, and replaced them with references to the Communist Party (Delano, Knottnerus, 2018: 79).

Ritual governance is most evident today along Eastern Europe's "Authoritarian Belt," extending from Putin's Russia to Orban's Hungary (Singh, 2014). Religious repression and simultaneous de-ritualization also characterize authoritarian states in Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa (Schluecker, 2021). The prevalence of cooption, mimicry, and repression across these regions underscores the continued importance of rituals for totalists (Koesel, 2014).

The stages of totalism

A historical overview of totalism reveals two often overlooked observations. First, a major challenge for totalism is regulating people's behavior. Second, the people under totalism – whose actions constitute the energy of the system itself – change over time from centering on a group of enthusiasts to including a coalition of like-minded individuals that if successful politically, can acquire considerable political power over others. These together entail a significant detail about totalism that gets routinely overlooked by propaganda scholars – totalist systems evolve socially.

From an evolutionary perspective, totalism is an emergent cultural system that changes over time. It generally begins with leaders who initiate a political movement by recruiting from communities who are hostile to a social order because of recurrent regime change or exploitative institutions. Such leaders use their authority to infiltrate political offices and personally appoint followers, thereby building a cult of personality, and once in power, often scapegoat others to cast blame for the totalist's own political failings (Marquez, 2018). Thus, we argue that totalism inherently develops and becomes manifest through five general stages.

Preformation

What gets missed in many analyses of totalitarianism is that before a totalitarian movement even begins, its soon-to-be adherents are loosely connected in a stage of *preformation*. These soon-to-be adherents are largely dispersed, meaning they are not yet organized and may not even realize their place in a network of other like-minded persons. Yet they remain linked and disposed to potential organization because they share propaganda and small-scale rituals.

As an illustration, ethnographic studies of terrorists (e.g., Atran, 2011) reveal that individuals who became totalitarian adherents share a flawed ideology, such as a cultural myth about their ethno-religious victimhood, group superiority, or racial power (MacDonald, 2003). These flawed ideologies encompass collective memories; namely, cultural knowledge with respect to a social identity that follows distinct cultural scripts and emphasizes events within a shared narrative about history and its meaning (see Wertsch, 2002). Would-be totalists also engage in the same small-scale rituals, such as memorializing a historical martyrdom or celebrating a leader's birthday (e.g., Evertone, 2016; Hughey, 2011; Terrone, 2018). Remarkably, these preliminary practices are often associated with cultural myths about a social identity that is meaningful but also connects practitioners to a violent history and perceived struggle against others (Gorski, Türkmen-Dervisoglu, 2013; Juergensmeyer, 2012).

Accordingly, these function as the basic constituents for totalitarianism. Flawed ideologies are simplified yet meaningful schemas about one's social identity, as that identity relates to others in an imagined cosmic struggle. Schemas of this sort are appealing to individuals with predispositions for cognitive inflexibility, authoritarianism, and just-world thinking (Van Bavel, Pereira, 2018). Hence, small-scale rituals – more so than mere propaganda exposure – would reinforce these feelings and provide a common ground for shared intentionality.

Cadre Formation

During acute political stress, leaders who share a flawed ideology and small-scale rituals begin to attract followers around an emerging totalitarian cause. Sensing which informative communication provides them with greater empowerment, leaders eventually develop a doctrine that broadly explains social arrangements and entails a purpose for would-be adherents. Specifically, a totalitarian doctrine centers on overturning a social order, righting historical wrongs, and building an envisioned utopia (Solt, 2012). If successful, the doctrine is also accepted by adherents from the pre-formative network and other enthusiasts dedicated to the leader's purpose. Together, they begin to form totalitarian cadres: small groups who prepare for the doctrine's total purpose.

At this stage, totalists differ from many other politically ideological groups in an important way, which can be grasped by way of illustration. Political activists usually focus on achieving justice peacefully but are often forced to adopt violence, while

totalists focus instead on absolute commitment from adherents and an acceptance of violence from the very outset. But where activism or revolutionary activities end and totalism begins is an open question during formation periods.³ It is not our intention to resolve this demarcation problem but to identify the rather stark characteristics of totalists when it comes to cadres. For one thing, totalist cadres exercise rather intense initiation rites, such as deprivation, scarification, or other psychological ordeals (Rensmann, 2011). Ethnographies suggest that such rites function to signal an adherent's acceptance of the group's commitment to violence and create cooperative bonds therein, rendering the group with a competitive advantage over others (Alcorta, Sosis, 2013).

Relatedly, it is important that we add a further distinction here that allows us to connect rituals in totalist cadres to psychological characteristics of extremists who are willing to sacrifice themselves, or others, for their cause – a behavior that is arguably the epitome of totalism. Although most rituals involve conventional acts that are separated from the mundane and clearly directed toward the nonempirical or supernatural, others can be more subtle and threaded around the mundane, and thereby render day-to-day life with potential sacred significance. The latter rituals are channeled through comparatively more routine activities involving simple gestures, words, actions, or objects (see Bell, 1997: 138–169). To distinguish these two sets of rituals, we refer to rites of passage, death and mourning rituals, calendrical rites, sacrifice or exchange, feasting or fasting, and political rites as “large-scale” or “collective” rituals that are closer to the imagistic than doctrinal mode (see Whitehouse, 2004). We refer to the simple gestures, words, or actions that are more doctrinal and which one can use with others to render otherwise ordinary moments with sacredness as “ritual practices”. This distinction, albeit somewhat idiosyncratic, is important for our purposes because totalists utilize both. When forming cadres, totalists use initiation rites to unite adherents, but thereafter they utilize small-scale but high-frequency ritual practices, such as regulating apparent purities and dangers, to shape moments – and the adherent's very existence – as bound to the cadre and its goals.

According to Lifton (2014 [1961]), totalists make use of the following ritual practices to inculcate a sense of dependency on the cadre and an acceptance of it as sacred:

- Milieu control: enacting a ritualized-like monitoring – both collectively and individually – of that which is deemed “pure” and “impure” information, and

3 Indeed, there is an important empirical question lurking here: when any ideological group forms cadres of enthusiasts to achieve a political outcome, at what point can we say they are totalists? Scholars have attempted to address this and similar questions by emphasizing the influence of underlying material conditions, relative deprivation, and various functional or dysfunctional institutions (e.g., Tilly, 2003). But the developmental trajectories of activist groups, revolutionaries, and would-be totalists is not linear but dynamic and subject to innumerable conditions. Demarcating the line, then, where otherwise peaceful revolutionaries who adopt violence ends and where violent revolutionaries who become totalists begins is an open question.

to expunge impurities from the adherent. Due to this, authorities manage to control what communicative information other adherents are exposed to – and thus creating an echo chamber.

- Mystical manipulation: building a shared habit of explaining nearly all social patterns in the world as fitting a destined or divined pattern, if not accounting for events by appealing to a conspiracy theory that reinforces the purpose of the cadre.
- Demand for purity: requiring adherents to maintain daily or moment-to-moment purity by eschewing social elements or ideas from outside the cadre that challenge its central doctrine.
- Cult of confession: regularly requiring adherents to confess their past wrongdoings (which violate the cadre's doctrine) or give up privacy to the moral scrutiny of the cadre.
- Sacred science: treating the cadre's doctrine as unchallengeable and exact, often by reducing arguments or ideas to repeated mottos, sacred postulates, or creeds that render the cadre's doctrine with an absoluteness.
- Loading the language: regularly reducing complex ideas to brief phrases that prevent debate and serve as symbolic gestures of group identity – i.e., using thought-terminating clichés to dismiss contradictory ideas or discourage any opposition to the cadre.
- Primacy of doctrine over person: accepting on multiple occasions that the cadre's doctrine and stated purpose are more true, real, or important than any individual human being – i.e., accepting that individual sacrifices may be necessary to achieve the cadre's goals.
- Dispensing of existence: expressing trust to cadre leaders and fellow adherents that the cadre itself may destroy property or dispense with life if it means achieving their aim – i.e., burning the world instead of failing in the cadre's goals.

We speculate that these low-scale but frequently used practices contribute to an acceptance of the cadre's actions but also an identity fusion among its members: that is, a psychological state in which adherents' personal and group identities become fused (Whitehouse, 2018). This is important insofar as research on self-sacrifice (Ibid.) suggests that identity fused individuals cultivate a willingness to sacrifice themselves or others for their group's cause. Hence, we propose that the above ritual practices – if done frequently and together – may contribute as much to accepting sacrifice by means of identity fusion as intense rites of initiation.

Coalitional building

The next stage occurs when cadres engender a broader movement that attracts general supporters. Extending beyond cadres, the ritual practices outlined above cascade into a wider network of persons that eventually make up a coalition. In

particular, many political coalitions predisposed to authoritarianism are characterized by milieu control, sacred science, and loading the language (Lifton, 2014 [1961]: 470). However, the most striking characteristic of an emerging coalitional movement bent on totalitarianism is that it centers around a charismatic or enigmatic figure or, in most cases, a network of such leaders who may feign respect for tradition and cultural mores but exercise authoritarianism (Gregor, 2015: 368–170). Particularly, they initially demand only strict obedience to their doctrine, but over time disregard or advocate restrictions on personal freedoms and demand action over rationality (Klemperer, 2013 [1957]). Along these lines, totalitarian leaders are notorious for building coalitions around propaganda that becomes demagogic and targets any political opposition as starkly evil (Stanley, 2016). Because such propaganda typically relies on rumors, conspiracies, lies, or self-contradictory claims, Petersen (2020) seems correct in recognizing most support as a hard-to-fake signal of commitment to the emerging coalition.

Importantly for our purposes, leaders at this stage begin to coordinate coalitions by utilizing *ritual governance*. This involves the transformation of once small-scale rituals or the politicization of a parent religion's rituals into widespread ritualization. Oftentimes, it also includes pilgrimages to sacred sites and mass displays of coalitional unity to disrupt existing social orders.

To illustrate, in the former Yugoslavia during the late 1980s, ultranationalist leaders in Serbia coopted aspects of Christian Orthodoxy to their movement (see Kiper, 2018, 2019). For example, *Vidovdan*, a Christian Orthodox Slava, or feast day, which commemorated the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, was coopted to reinforce ethnonationalist ideology and ritual governance. The Battle of Kosovo, though a historical event, is a longstanding myth in Serbia that commemorates the legendary martyrdom of Prince Lazar and other Serb Knights who gave their lives to protect Serbian lands from Turkish invaders. Prior to Milošević, *Vidovdan* was a small-scale ritual, but it became central to ultranationalist cadres, such as Chetniks, and gained widespread political prominence, reinforcing the ethnonationalist cooption of Christian Slavism. This was the belief that Slavs uphold the essence of Serbia and Christian Europe, and that abandoning their ethnoreligious roots, which ultranationalists portrayed as a new-fangled ethnoreligious nationalism, was betrayal (see MacDonald, 2003; Sells, 2003). A critical turning point occurred when ultranationalists and church leaders – independently at first, but eventually jointly – led mass pilgrimages to sacred sites, namely, relics of Serb martyrs, including Lazar's. The largest included over one million Serbs to Kosovo Polje, the sacred Field of Kosovo, on 28 June 1989, the 600th Anniversary of the Kosovo Battle. At this politicized religious commemoration, Milošević was notoriously elevated to a Serb savior and thereby solidified the ultranationalist coalition that executed the so-called Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution from 1988 to 1989, which removed non-Serb socialists from government offices (Vučetić, 2021).

During Kiper's fieldwork, numerous survivors and former combatants of the Yugoslav Wars talked about the elevation of Milošević to a savior-like status at the

600th Anniversary of the Kosovo Battle and subsequent rallies as a turning point in the growing coalition's power. As one former combatant explained, ultranationalists and church leaders coordinated together to compel communities – usually co-operatives, churches, and schools – to attend Milošević's rallies to simulate support for Milošević. "When he [Milošević] gave speeches", the former combatant explained, "we were instructed not to go to school but to go to the rallies and show our support. And that made it worse [i.e., the intensifying power of ultranationalists] because people saw the crowds on TV and said, 'he must be right'" (Kiper, 2018: 45).

Singh (2014) suggests that ritual governance of this type allows for two kinds of social regulation. First, it provides a vertical regulation in which coopted religious events and associated rituals communicate to adherents that the new social order will stem from their traditions, not others. Second, it extends a horizontal regulation in which participation in public rituals communicates acceptance of the new social order and, alongside background ideologies, that social arrangements at odds with the movement will not be tolerated.

Collective power

The subsequent stage, if the coalitional can somehow manage to control institutions, is the transition from movement to regime. Totalists control institutions through political purges and court-packings, such as Milošević's "anti-bureaucratic" purges of virtually every office, from news agencies to the military (Kuzmanović, 2019). In the interest of space, we cannot address the multitude of institutions that totalists could control but suffice it to say that purging and thus controlling a society's prevailing institutions, such as its military, economic, or political organizations, is a decisive move for totalist regimes. In most cases, the period after a regime's purges constitutes its peak of collective power, when the collective falls behind the regime's ideology – hence the regime's "collective power."

During this period, totalists regularly make use of *reading-between-the-lines propaganda*. As a form of manipulation, such propaganda works not by persuading audiences to believe the content of political claims, but rather by intimidating individuals to behave in certain ways. Often, this form of propaganda is seemingly theatrical, ceremonial, or blatantly unjust. A good illustration comes from Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (2018 [1974]), in which standing ovations to Stalin at the Central Committee would last for several minutes – sometimes a quarter of an hour. According to Solzhenitsyn, the first official to stop clapping would occasionally be arrested and imprisoned. These displays of power functioned as reading-between-the-lines propaganda because they conveyed to fellow elites that any failure to express support for the regime, especially its central leader, could result in grave punishment. However, some of the more common expressions of reading-between-the-lines propaganda – in which the masses are expected to express support the regime, despite their actual beliefs – are the following. Totalists make repeated designations of the regime's enemies and monitor audience responses; they call for total service to the

regime and expect audiences to answer enthusiastically; and they encourage followers to convert if not police neighbors according to the regime's cause (Lakomy, 2021). And as the above example of Stalin illustrates, totalists spend a great deal of time engaging in *communication rituals*: these are mediated ceremonies of mass pageantry, including parades and rallies, oftentimes to honor the regime and, arguably, worship its leader. Arendt (1951), having concentrated on reading-between-the-lines propaganda and communication rituals, correctly described them as functioning to express the regime's power over the masses.

Mass public ceremonies also serve as opportunities for persons to signal their loyalty and commitment to the regime, if not the practical obligation to fall in line behind it. These ceremonies typically co-occur with de-ritualization of other groups. It is no coincidence, then, that totalists use communication rituals during the peak of their collective power as the main tool for expressing the new social order, including the perpetuation of totalist hierarchies and ideologies (Khazanov, 2008: 133).

For instance, during Yugoslav succession, when Serb ultranationalists maximized their power, religion was coopted further for multiple political purposes. The most startling was the characterization of Greater Serbia and securing Serbian territories as a "holy war" (Tanner, 2010). At the same time, Serb authorities disbanded Islamic practices, and soon thereafter oversaw militants – many of whom were blessed by priests before battle – who destroyed mosques and engaged in ethnic cleansings (see Sells, 2003). Tellingly, a Serb combatant reported after the war that, "My generation found its identity in the church. We saw the war as an effort by Muslims and Croats to destroy [our] identity. The church is what [gave] us meaning" (Hedges, 1997: 12). Like many who come of age during a totalist regime, the combination of reading-between-the-lines propaganda and communication rituals results in an identity fused with the regime or its leader and a sociopolitical purpose in defeating the regime's enemies.

To give an additional example, Kiper was told by several former combatants that fighting in the Bosnian War (1992–1995) became noticeably more violent when Milošević and Karadžić coordinated their efforts to attain a "Greater Serbia". Soon thereafter, ethnonationalist ceremonies overlapped with religious holidays (Mojzes, 2012) and many Serb combat units included religious specialists who oversaw warfront rituals, resulting in increased collective violence. As one informant explained when discussing reconciliation today, "what I can't forgive are the guys [who were] in the back, the priests – they contributed a lot to indoctrination. They were making war crimes by making this a holy war". He went on to say, "I blame them because wherever they were, fighters were ruthless; I would say fanatical, because they came with Chetniks, guys in beards — the whole uniform — who brought more weapons and attacked anyone they could" (Kiper, 2018: 305). Other scholars (e.g., Mojzes, 2012, 2016, 2020) have likewise noted the effects of religion and religious cooption during the height of ultranationalist political power during the Yugoslav Wars, which, alongside warfront rituals, likely contributed to extremism and sacrifice for some combatants (see also Tomanić, 2021).

Breakdown

The stage of collective power is fragile and followed by breakdown. In the next section, we briefly describe why breakdown is inevitable for totalists. Here, we note that propaganda at this final stage is almost always fatalistic, with classic double-speak and falsehoods that provoke deepened cynicism among the masses. As an illustration, the Nazis began to experience breakdown as early as 1941, when propaganda shifted to recognizable falsehoods about wartime successes and delusional imaginaries about the future that merged the regime and the German people's destiny. Further, extant evidence suggests that despite the Nazi's attempts to raise morale in this period, most Germans did not believe the propaganda (see Mercier, 2020: 129–144). It is also at this stage that new cadres emerge that oppose the regime, usually involving grassroots resistance or elites that splinter from the regime. Accordingly, communication rituals continue at the surface-level of the regime, but below the surface cadres employ initiation rites, pledges, and other costly acts that signal oppositional commitments. With such internal fractioning, most regimes commit their worst mass atrocity crimes during the breakdown stage when they begin to lose their grip on power (Fujii, 2011; Straus, 2015).

As an illustration, Dix (1982) examined the breakdown of five totalist regimes in the twentieth century and found that all underwent a similar trajectory. The overreach of blatantly false propaganda and frequent communication-rituals dedicated to the regime contributed to the popularly perceived delegitimation, and subsequent divisions among elites. The latter, in turn, prompted elites to look for exit strategies while steadfast regime leaders – in paranoia – purged competitors from the regime or attacked opponents to secure their hold on power.

One of the more subtle but important factors that likely contributes to breakdown is that totalitarian regimes (overly) attempt to regulate meaning. Based on the work of Knight and Lewis (2017), we suggest that a regime's regulation of meanings, such as what is humorous, is attempted through the principle of reversal: this is when “deceptive signals aimed originally by a coalition against an external target are subsequently redeployed for honest communication purposes within the group” (Ibid.: 435). Critical is the difference between how metaphorical messages are interpreted by adherents at the early stages of propaganda and by wider audiences toward the regime's end. Briefly, during cadre and coalitional formation, metaphorical expressions depend on ostension (i.e., cues to communicate intentions) and inference (i.e., interpretation of those cues; see Knight, Lewis, 2017: 436). But during the stage of collective power, they become honest yet unsustainable signals, insofar as many people recognize them as expected, which eventually leads to fatalism and cynicism among the wider masses.

For instance, cadres and coalitions of Serb ultranationalists used the expression “Bog čuva Srbe” (God favors Serbs) as a metaphorical expression – or, more accurately, a shibboleth or second-order expression – that communicated an intension to defend a Greater Serbia. And though it served as an honest signal for supporting the Milošević regime during its height of power, it eventually became a source of cynicism

prior to the downfall of Milošević, when the Serb Orthodox Church had turned against him (Mojzes, 2012, 2016).

Totalism as a quasi-religious system

Given the recurrent stages of totalism and how propaganda and rituals consistently function to regulate behavior, we suggest that totalism is a quasi-religious system. Studies of totalism suggest that totalist movements or factions emerge as systems that coopt a parent religious system and in so doing attain strong group cooperation and coordination at the stage of cadres and coalitions. However, unlike successful religious systems, totalist systems fail to generate sustained cooperation and coordination at the stage of collective power. For example, extant research suggests that collective rituals provide strong signals of ingroup commitment for communities (see Xygalatas et al., 2021), but communication rituals imposed by totalist regimes fail to generate such commitments. At this stage, communities under totalist regimes routinely suffer from lack of trust and likewise economic hardships, poor health outcomes, and undesirable reproductive rates and survival (e.g., Frantz, 2018: 46–48, 130–131; Sen, 1997). It is no wonder that totalist systems transition to a phase of breakdown soon after attaining collective power.

For example, in Weimar Germany, cadres of enthusiasts for National Socialism grew sporadically from 1918 to 1925, eventually exercising collective power in 1933, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. A telling historical analysis comes from Taylor (1981), who found that the Nazis – from their formative years through their years of collective power – exercised numerous rituals. These included yearly celebrations (Jahreslauf), life celebration rituals (Lebensfeiern), as well as daily morning rituals (Morgenfeiern). While these were enthusiastically practiced prior to 1941, they declined when, we suggest, the Nazis attained collective power but could no longer sustain cooperation and coordination. Although Nazi Germany fashioned an Aryan welfare state that parasitically exploited Jews and other Europeans, its negative outcomes were eventually detrimental to most people in the system (see Aly, 2005).

Something similar happened in Milošević's Serbia. Soon after ultranationalists incrementally attained power from 1987 to 1991, the economic hardships of war led to a decade of Serbia's worst economy, except for elites in the ultranationalist regime. Additionally, nearly every family in rural Serbia was negatively affected by war, while recruitments for war in urban areas led to anti-war protests. Further, the birth rate in Serbia dropped from 2.5 prior to the Milošević regime to 1.48 when a coup removed him from office in 2000 (*World Bank*, 2018). These and other cumulative failures led to the Serbian Orthodox Church not only breaking with ultranationalists but leading an anti-war movement that invited Serbs back into the traditional church (see Mojzes, 2016).

Accordingly, totalism is “quasi” religious for at least three reasons. First, it is more cult-like than religious. Totalism is usually vested in a particular person or elite group

of leaders, a specific set of total goals that benefit those leaders, and a primacy of ideology over person. Such ideology is strikingly unstable insofar as it usually lasts only for decades, while arguably most religious ideologies last for centuries (Talmont-Kaminski, 2013: 114–116). For totalist movements, the primacy of leaders and ideology eventually lead to profound negative effects when encompassing more than coalitions of enthusiasts. Further, when a totalist system collapses after its collective power stage, a new social order emerges that relies on the parent religion and seemingly traditional collective rituals to institute a return to conventional social order (e.g., Kanyangara, Rime, Philippot, Yzerbyt, 2007).

Second, and relatedly, totalism often maintains an antagonistic relationship to religion and in most cases a parent religion, and thus restricts the religious market and engenders broad opposition to the regime (Duckitt, Bizumic, 2013). Although this is most evident in secular states where totalists engage in ritual governance, religious mimicry, or the outright repression of religion, it is also true for religious regimes that verge on totalism (e.g., Driessen, 2014; Juergensmeyer, 2012). We do not have the means here to address such repressive religious regimes, but we note that they likely engender factional infighting and splintering for the same reasons that totalists in secular states fail: they overly restrict the religious market. In place of an open cultural market, totalists typically coopt or mimic a parent religion while at the same time devalue the wellbeing of most subjects, which serve as motivations – among others – for politico-legal retaliations, uprisings, or coups (Frantz, 2018).

Third, and most importantly, totalists over-sanctify power. To over-sanctify is to make binding that which has material consequences rather than things that are unfalsifiable; in other words, sanctifying social rules above ultimate sacred postulates in this sense is to cause to be or seem morally right and acceptable.⁴ Yet it is not power in itself that is sanctified but rather power to attain the utopian vision of the totalist regime. By over-sanctifying power to achieve their total aims, totalists exercise too much control over the religious and overall cultural market, preventing any social innovation that would correct the system. Because totalists control the media and use rituals at the collective stage to impose and communicate their power, they effectively blind themselves to feedback from the system. The principle of sanctification is also connected to the control of meanings. Keeping with the example of metaphor, power for totalizing purposes is not always declared and singular, much as it is during the early stages of a totalist movement. Instead, it is often stimulated through the strict control over religion (or lack thereof) and other aspects of culture, and by imposed communication that provokes signs of deference or obedience but not open or free expressions.

Taken together, the top-down rituals of totalists fail to generate the energy and information needed to sustain a regime against the negative outcomes of striving for

4 We rely on the notion of sanctification and over-sanctification from Rappaport (1999). See specifically pages 147, 207–208, 326–343, 432–437, and 450–455.

total power. The over-sanctification of power leads to an inability to adapt and, therefore, a system failure occurs within a relatively short period of time.

Conclusion

In this article, we defended a tentative but new way of looking at totalism. That view identifies some of the factors that are missing from current models and can help clarify longstanding debates about how totalists coordinate individuals and coalitions. We made four observations in particular. First, totalism often coopts or represses religion and enacts its own rituals. Second, totalist rituals function alongside propaganda to influence and recruit followers. Third, how totalists employ ritual and propaganda for social regulation – and who is a target of that social regulation – changes over the life course of a totalist movement. Fourth, totalism tends to have a common historical trajectory that can be described as five progressive stages.

Of course, our approach is not without limitations. As a preliminary exploration of the role of ritual among totalists, we relied on examples of recent totalist regimes that were either self-proclaimed atheists or ostensibly anti-religious, but still functioned as quasi-religious systems. Other examples may not have yielded the general factors or historical trajectory that we adumbrated. For instance, it is possible that political and revolutionary movements that have endorsed violence and required absolute commitment from adherents but nevertheless avoided totalism, such as Irish Republicanism and the Tamil Tigers, may highlight alternative trajectories. Alternatively, such examples may prove to be exceptions to most totalist regimes or that by investigating their trajectory further it would reveal key factors or historical conditions that prevented them from becoming totalistic.

In any event, once we gain a holistic view of the developmental trajectory of totalist movements, and how propaganda and ritual work together at each phase of development, at least three ongoing problems will get clarified. Specifically, we will understand how propaganda works. In this article, we suggested that propaganda must function differently at each phase of totalist development and, critically, alongside rituals to be effective. Additionally, viewing totalism as a complex adaptive system helps to show why rituals are necessary for totalism. We speculated that while rites can bond a cadre of totalists, and though collective rituals as well as pilgrimages can sustain a coalitional movement, a totalist regime is difficult to maintain because, in part, communication rituals and de-ritualization cannot engender sustained cooperation and coordination for large populations. Lastly, we suggested that unlike most successful religions – in other words, those that have endured the test of time – totalist systems are quasi-religious insofar as they over-sanctify power and attempt to control meanings. Consequently, they are relatively unreceptive to information about their social, economic, and political environment and become inflexible, incapable of appropriately adapting to new conditions. The ability to adapt is the hallmark of any successful system and thus although totalist systems can be dangerous,

especially during their demise, they do not endure. Totalist movements may be short-lived, but they are recurring. Hopefully the insights on totalism that we have offered here advance our understanding of these movements, with the ultimate aim of minimizing the suffering and damage these movements inflict when they arise.

Acknowledgements

Richard Sosis would like to thank the James Barnett Endowment for Humanistic Anthropology at the University of Connecticut, and Jordan Kiper would like to thank the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Office of the Provost for the Faculty Development Grant.

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