

## You Say Utopia; I Say Dystopia: From Idealism to Nihilism in Utopias

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The article argues for a return to a philosophical and political understanding of utopias that includes intentional visions of the better future and for a move away from understanding the term, like some contemporary academics do, as nothing more than a critique of present social conditions and a vague hope for a better future. The article claims that this shift in intellectual perspective is crucial for understanding why attempts to implement utopian visions will produce dystopian results. It sites as examples of dystopian utopias Kurtz's commercial station in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, small "intentional communities," and the Soviet Union under Stalinism. It compares and contrasts Joseph Stalin with Conrad's Kurtz, employing literary analysis to historical narratives on Stalinism and applying a historical analysis to Conrad's fiction, in order to unearth and highlight the nihilism within utopian visions.

It's safe to say that most human beings hope for a better future for themselves and for their community, however broadly or narrowly they define the latter and however general or specific the acts of hoping become. It's further safe to claim that very few people engage in envisioning utopias whether by describing these in fictional or nonfictional writings, or by actively supporting experimental communities. Yet, works of utopian studies have stretched the definition of the term to the point where it does not only refer to a fairly concrete description of an ideal society and/or an active engagement in establishing such a society, but it can also be used interchangeably with a feeling of hope. In "The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia," Bill Ashcroft claims that "for most contemporary utopian theory utopia is no longer a place but the spirit of hope itself, the essence of desire for a better world" (8). Equating utopia with hope incongruously makes just about everyone a utopian. The reduction of utopia to one of its elements, that of hope, may have a theoretical rationale and its usefulness for theoreticians, but for practical purposes it obfuscates a term that in popular understanding has clear delineations. Yet, Lisa Garforth's claims in "'No Intentions? Utopian Theory after the Future'" that in its popular understanding the term utopia "remains trapped between the twin poles of, on the one hand, its dismissive association with impractical, fantastical and totalitarian schemes for social improvement and, on the other, its unreflexive use as shorthand for positive or hopeful orientations to the future, however vague and unformed" (5). Her assertion that when used dismissively in popular parlance the term becomes linked to "impractical" and "totalitarian schemes for social improvement" implies that the popular notion of utopia is really much more rigorous than a "vague and unformed" "hopeful orientation."

The popular understanding of utopia is in many ways more precise than its academic permutation, and goes back to works like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). In popular parlance, utopia connotes a future ideal society that critiques the present by stretching through an act of imagination, whether in literary or essay form, or through some other artistic medium, present conceptions of justice and egalitarianism beyond what is deemed possible by contemporaneous mores. Though sharing some similar elements with contemporary academic definitions of the term, this is an understanding of utopia that grounds the concept in something beyond ephemeral hope or as Garforth puts it "the moment at which an encounter with a piece of music or a work of art stimulates the apprehension of and yearning for a better way of being" (8). This analogy basically equates utopia with daydreaming.

The vagueness of the academic definition of utopia makes it possible for some historians and political scientists to include within the category of utopias movements that the public would hardly consider utopian. Sometimes included within the pantheon of grand utopian schemes of the twentieth century, the Nazis are a case in point. Scholars who refer to Nazism as utopian also highlight one aspect of utopia and place it above all others. Instead of focusing on hope, in this case, they take the “totalitarian” aspect of utopian visions that detail the comprehensive functioning of an imagined society and conflate this type of “total” approach with “totalitarian dictatorships” that seek to dominate that “totality” of the society they control through violence and intimidation. Indeed, it is my argument throughout this article that attempts to establish utopian nation-states will inevitably lead to “totalitarian dictatorships” and to the massive violence associated with these systems. However, not all totalitarian systems are utopians. Not all promise that the present fear and paranoia that justifies the contemporaneous state of repression will be overcome in an ever approaching peaceful and egalitarian future. The violence of Nazism was not one resulting from an attempt to establish a utopia. As David Wedgwood Benn argues in his article “On Comparing Nazism and Stalinism,” Hitler and his followers “explicitly denied the brotherhood of man” (192). The Nazi vision shun utopia. It explicitly promised no peace for those who it wished to subjugate, and in the case of the Jews completely destroy, and for the “Aryans” who were to remain in a perpetual state of vigilance, more like paranoia, had Hitler’s schemes succeeded. If it was comprehensive at all in its vision of the future, Nazism was explicitly dystopian for both its victims and its would-be beneficiaries. Stalin’s Soviet Union by contrast does provide a clear example of how grand utopian projects lead to mass murder.

Historical narratives about the Soviet Dictator, Iosif Vissarionovich Djugashvili, Joseph Stalin, from Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror* (1968) to more recent works like Wendy Z. Goldman’s *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin* (2007), move from a few relative achievements to a litany of murderous campaigns while providing only personal or sociological motivations as explanations for crimes of cosmic magnitude. The fault lines, the gaps, in the attempted accounts of Stalin’s actions leave readers of history with a character as mysterious and ominous as Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Like a chorus of Marlow’s murmuring “no methods at all” (57), historians provide no overarching philosophical rationale for the massive blood-letting of the deportations, the purges, the forced starvations, the Great Terror, and the Doctor’s Plot. I do not claim nor wish to imply here that historians model their accounts of the Soviet tyrant after Conrad’s fictional character. Like good scholars of history, they attempt to decipher the reasons for Stalin’s actions from the historical evidence available—documents produced by Stalin, by leading Politburo members at the time, and by officials of the Soviet bureaucracy of oppression as well as interviews with surviving victims and their descendants. However, I do wish to argue here that in order to better elucidate the historical Stalin, one field of the humanities, history, needs to communicate with other fields, such as literary criticism, utopian studies, and philosophy. A critical understanding of Conrad’s novella and the critique of utopian schemes embedded in its literary portrait of Kurtz leads to a more complete and cohesive interpretation of Stalin’s life and his violent regime.

### Kurtz and Stalin: Challenges of Comparing Fictional and Nonfictional Characters

Some readers may feel uncomfortable with an interdisciplinary analysis of a historical figure that willingly crosses borders among at least four disciplines: history, literary studies, utopian studies, and philosophy. My interest in historical portraits of Stalin and in literary

critiques of Conrad's novel stem from my belief that they are two archetypal examples, one from the left and one from the right, of how utopian schemes lead to dystopian outcomes. As Garforth makes clear in tracing the academic understanding of utopia, the field requires an interdisciplinary approach because it has evolved from a concern with literary representations of utopias to "debates about the social effects of a much wider range of utopian thought" (6). In some sense, this article moves in the opposite direction of Garforth's historicity. It connects the effects of utopian thought upon the Bolshevik experiment to a literary anticipation of its disastrous consequences embodied in the reign of the fictional right-wing utopian, Kurtz.

From the perspective of utopian studies, objections may be raised against comparisons and contrasts drawn between the ruler of a nation-state and the despotic manager of a remote commercial station. In her article "Strange Places," Lucy Sargisson exposes some of the potential pitfalls inherent to small, utopian communities. These include estrangement from surrounding communities and collective alienation. Small, utopian communities can often move from viewing outsiders as threats to fearing threats from within. As Sargisson explains, "any group that feels besieged or beleaguered can become defensive and increasingly hostile towards its critics. This hostility affects relationships within the group. Internal discipline and dogma intensify under such circumstances, and people (members and non-members) who challenge the belief system or leader come to be seen as enemies" (404). Though Sargisson concerns herself primarily with the functioning of relatively small, "intentional communities," specifically in New Zealand and in England, the core of such an insight applies to communities that set themselves apart as radically distinct ideals to be favorably contrasted with their neighbors regardless of their size, geographical location, and historical context. It is not my intention here to dismiss the differences between running a commercial station in colonial Africa and ruling a modernizing socialist state in the twentieth century. Though I cannot expound on the differences within the scope of this article, I accept that they are there. It is, nonetheless, a useful intellectual project to trace how the distinct social-political entities in the African Congo and in the Soviet Union and their respective rulers elucidate each other. Stalin and Kurtz are useful fonts for comparison and contrast in clarifying how utopian thoughts and practices lead to dystopian outcomes.

Many may accept the interdisciplinary nature of utopian studies and may even find it useful to compare and contrast small, "intentional communities" with larger nation-states, but still pose an ontological objection to comparing and contrasting an actual person, who once lived on earth, to a character, who has had a longer, but less embodied life in fiction. This kind of objection implies that it is only proper or possible to compare two real human beings. In my view, it is impossible to compare and contrast two humans as humans, as living, developing, and ultimately unpredictable biological beings. When we compare and contrast two humans beings, be it mother and father, or two historical figures, like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin who are often incorrectly paired in historical accounts, what we analyze side by side is not the living beings, but our stories of these nonfiction characters. This is especially true when we compare historical figures whose lives have been written about and analyzed to the point that when we read or write about them we are reading or writing in agreement or disagreement with other accounts of their lives.

Historical accounts and fictional narratives have much more in common as texts than would first appear to be the case from a traditional perspective that draws clear lines between nonfictional and fictional representations. Literary scholars have written about the fading line between fiction and nonfiction genres. Kai Mikkonen's, for example, asserts in "Can Fiction Become Fact?" that "there are no isolated features in texts such as single 'fictional' sentences

that can determine whether some text is fiction” (291). In other words, there is nothing within most works of fiction that would announce to readers that these are fictional creations. Certainly, most serious works of fiction do not begin with the announcement, “once upon a time,” or end with the fairytale conclusion, “happily ever after.” Instead, serious works of fiction are presented as framed moments of lived lives. It is our previously agreed upon understanding as readers that works we are reading are either fiction or nonfiction that makes us experience the works as “either or.” Furthermore, even the most fantastic works of fiction do not represent completely distinct universes, totally divorced from the one in which readers and authors live their lives. These creations often rely on the experiences of the authors and deal with issues that the authors are concerned with during their lifetimes. Works of fictions depict characters that grapple with problems and issues of the real world. Without these depictions, fiction would hardly merit reading much less serious academic consideration.

I grant that there is one crucial difference between writing nonfictional biographies and writing fiction about imaginary characters – that difference is documentation. As Mikkonen puts it, nonfiction characters require “the documentation of identity” and the corroboration of “testimony” (293). Historians, in contrast to novelists, need to submit as much independent evidence as possible that their characters existed and that they participated in the actions depicted in the nonfiction narratives. Still, the historical, political, social, and philosophical insights that can be gathered from a good work of fiction are just as valuable as those that can be gathered from a good historical account. Accepting that Kurtz is fictional and that Stalin existed in the world does not prevent us from examining one to attain insights into the other.

#### Strange Bedfellows: Do Kurtz and Stalin Share Anything in Common?

In addition to the differences in realm of existence, Kurtz and Stalin would also seem to have other distinctions. In *Stalin* (2003), Simon Sebag Montefiore describes the “red tsar” as having a “swarthy pock-marked face, grey hair, broken stained teeth and yellow Oriental eyes” (466). The image of the short radical man with the “swarthy face” and the “Oriental eyes” contrasts sharply with a Kurtz to which “all Europe contributed in the making” (Conrad 45). Building on his physical appearance and his Georgian origins, biographies often present Stalin as being born on the periphery of, if not outside, European civilization. Of Stalin’s native land, Montefiore writes, “Westerners often do not realize how foreign Georgia was: an independent kingdom for millennia with its own ancient language, traditions, cuisine, it was only consumed by Russia in gulps between 1801 and 1878. With its sunny climate, clannish blood feuds, songs and vineyards, it resembles Sicily more than Siberia (25-26).” Stalin was a regional outsider to the precincts of the new Soviet leadership, which was still overwhelmingly Russian in its identification. Kurtz’s customs and his values are portrayed as stemming from the best of the West. He is portrayed as a man that belongs to European culture and civilization, not to its periphery like Stalin.

Within the general status of the outsider, we can still begin to draw similarities between the historical representation of Stalin and the fictional portrayal of Kurtz. Conrad’s creation is not a regional outsider like Stalin. Kurtz’s outsider status comes from his class. Marlow speculates about whether Kurtz had been “a pauper” and even claims, “he had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there” (70). This outsider status helps readers of fiction understand the practical, self-interested motivations of a character who finds in the enterprise of exploiting Africans and Africa’s resources a way of gaining entrance into the higher echelons of Europe’s restricted, nineteenth-century class

structure. The outsider status also serves to help readers of history comprehend why a radicalized young man of humble means, coming from the periphery of the Russian Empire, would be drawn to a revolutionary movement that promised equal treatment and opportunity to all the tsar's subjects. Yet, the outsider status by itself cannot account for the chaotic devastation and oppression Kurtz and Stalin unleashed upon their respective subjects.

Politically, Kurtz and Stalin appear to have very different ideologies. As an avowed capitalist, Kurtz works for the benefit of a large, ivory trading company. He harbors the ideal of "enlightening" the native population of the Congo that labor for him with the cultural practices and standards of Western Europe. At first glance, Kurtz would seem a man of the right, a somewhat traditional European imperialist. Stalin, the communist dictator of the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1953, would appear to be a man of the left, since his regime professed to be working towards a day when all would share equally from the resources of the planet. Indeed, until his crimes were fully aired and became apparent, his regime was held as an ideal within respectable circles of the left in Western democracies. Still, like ends of a horseshoe, the outer limits of the political spectrum come close to touching. This has become a truism in comparative studies of Hitler and Stalin.

The comparisons and contrasts between these two twentieth century dictators as I alluded to above, however, provide little insight to elucidate the roots of their actions. While there is a straight connection between the ideas in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925) and the horrors of the concentration camp, there seems to be a glaring gap between the ideals of fraternity and justice expressed by international communism and the horrors of the prison-extermination system known as the Gulag. Furthermore, as Goldman points out,

[Stalinist terror], with its complicated organizational and psychological mechanisms of self-destruction, differed sharply from the mobile killing squads and genocidal death camps of Nazism. If the rhetoric of Nazism was aimed at the "enemy" without, the rhetoric of the Soviet terror centered on "unmasking" the "enemy" within. In this sense, the analogy between Hitler and Stalin, so commonly invoked, does little to illuminate the dynamics of the Soviet terror. 8

Goldman's account of Stalinist terror touches upon Sargisson elucidation of how "intentional communities" can devour themselves when members are persecuted and "become isolated within the group" (406) because of their perceived challenges to orthodoxy. These small versions of utopian societies apply some of the same mechanisms of oppression and coercion that Bolshevism practiced more violently and writ large. Nazism, by contrast, had external enemies to lash out against. The common comparison of Hitler and Stalin neither elucidates the motivations of the men nor the workings of the totalitarian systems they controlled. As Benn succinctly puts the case, "Nazism was an ideology of German exceptionalism aimed at justifying a purely predatory enterprise of foreign conquest. It was unconcerned with the salvation of the human race; and for that reason cannot be bracketed together with communism" (194). Despite their seemingly different political ideologies, Conrad's Kurtz and the historical Stalin share distinct visions of universal improvement that serve as the underlying impetus for their similar actions. The underlying unity between these visions comes to the fore upon closer examination.

#### The Radical Politics of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz

There has been no dearth of explanations for Kurtz's fictional, but historically accurate, life and for the "darkness" the novel's title alludes to. There have been psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial critiques as well as readings of the text guided by all sorts of linguistic



schools of criticism. All approaches have their truths to convey about Kurtz, about European imperialism, and about the historical moment captured in Conrad's haunting story. However, since the text invites political and historical readings centered on colonialism with Marlow's fixation on the differences between Europeans and Africans, critics have mostly ignored how Kurtz's acts of mass murders and his justifications for such behavior anticipate the genocidal rampages that have marked the globe since the start of the twentieth century.

Michael Lackey's "The Moral Conditions for Genocide in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" provides a useful analysis of the ways in which the novel portrays an ideology that begins as a blueprint for the betterment of humanity and ends in mass murder. For Lackey, Judeo-Christian morality comes under attack in Conrad's depiction of Kurtz. Lackey traces the imperial notions of mastery of the earth and the civilizing mission that justified the British and other Western empires to the biblical exhortations from God to his chosen people. According to Lackey, the British saw themselves as heirs to the ancient Jews of the Old Testament. They were the new chosen. The logic connecting the religious notion of the chosen with imperialism worked as follows: "The British have been charged with building the city of God on earth. Therefore, they can take whatever land on the planet they deem fit" (27). In Lackey's view, the Judeo-Christian tradition of the chosen and the saved at war against the heathens not only justified brutality, such as theft, rape, and murder against the non-chosen, the non-people, but it ultimately called for their extermination.

For Lackey, the crimes Kurtz commits in pursuing ivory follow from the civilizing ideals with which he enters the jungle. Early in his mission, Kurtz had claimed that "each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (29). The murderous tyrant Marlow finds in the jungle contradict for him the Kurtz who wanted to "improve" the native peoples of the Congo. As Marlow recalls the image of heads impaled on spikes, he laments, "there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraints in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (53). In Marlow's judgment, Kurtz had not only abandoned his zeal for "improving" the moral condition of the Congo's native peoples, but he had also discarded his sanity.

For Marlow, the Kurtz he finds is an African adulteration of the energetic European who had broached the jungle with a dual mission of commerce and civilization. Chinua Achebe's polemical critique of the text in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" goes too far in singling out Conrad for portraying racial beliefs that were common even with the most liberal of his European contemporaries. Still, Achebe seems to hit at a much more challenging truth when he claims Conrad's work displays a tendency of "Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (2). Achebe makes much of passages where Marlow describes Africa as an early, primitive earth, almost a different planet. Indeed, passages such as these abound in the novel: "The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman" (32). Achebe downplays the insight drawn by Marlow on the ultimate connection between Europeans and Africans, and in the process, skewing a more nuanced critical

perspective, equates the attitudes conveyed by Marlow's most racist words with the beliefs of Conrad the author.

In *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981), Mikhail Bakhtin claims that the central feature distinguishing the novel from other forms of fiction is its use of multiple dialogues, in which one voice is not set up as truly authoritative over any other. Bakhtin identifies this characteristic as *heteroglossia* in the novel. *Heteroglossia*, the competing voices in the world created and reflected by the novel, enters the narrative "as impersonal stylizations of generic, professional, and other social languages - impersonal, but pregnant with the images of speaking persons - or it enters as the fully embodied image of a posited author, of narrators or, finally as characters" (331-332). Authors of novels do not necessarily intend all competing voices to share equal status. However, in order for the world of a novel to seem realistic, it must convey the illusion of equal status to more than one voice. Thus, the novel doesn't only presents multiple voices and multiple perspectives in various characters, but it also presents varied voices and perspectives in a single character. Bakhtin defines this feature of the novel as "hybridization," as one of the devices employed by the novel to "create the image of a language," (358) to make the utterances of a created character or narrator seem as complex as those of a living human being. Hybridization in the novel "is the mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor." Thus, contradictory beliefs and utterances, such as Marlow's expression of shock at Kurtz's treatment of Africans while he articulates some of the same attitudes about them that facilitates such cruelty can coherently and believably coexist within the same character in the novel. The presence of *heteroglossia* and hybridity in the novel makes it a dangerous and problematic critical undertaking to ascertain authorial attitude from the words of a single character as Achebe does with Marlow and Conrad. Lackey's reading of the novel, by contrast, relies more on the narrative arc of *Heart of Darkness* than on the specific words of any character. Therefore, he can complicate Marlow's attempt to trace Kurtz's downfall to the influence of Africa.

Lackey believes that the narrative progression of the story reveals the true nature of the apparent shift in Kurtz. He connects the idealistic imperialist who first enters the Congo with the genocidal maniac Marlow encounters. For Lackey, there is no contrast between the eloquent words in Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs and his scribbled, genocidal conclusion calling for the extermination of "all the brutes!" (Conrad, 46). Lackey claims that the British and European civilizing enterprise could only come to such conclusion. The "Savage Customs" could never be completely eradicated. The colonizers, the minority in the colonized regions, ran the risk of adopting the values of the colonized. According to Lackey, the biblical tradition of destroying heathens justifies itself on the grounds that their refusal to convert exposes the saved to contamination: "If it can be shown that Africans adulterate the spiritual life of the Chosen People, then genocide becomes not just permissible; it becomes a moral obligation" (34). Certainly, the picture we get of Kurtz through Marlow is of someone who has been "adulterated" by his contact with Africans. Marlow makes clear that in his opinion he has found a Kurtz who has degenerated into a primordial, animal state. According to Marlow, Kurtz participates in "unspeakable rites" (45) at nights and crawls "on all fours" (59). Yet, significantly for Lackey, Kurtz's violence and bloodlust is not a further manifestation of his adoption of African customs, but a way to shore up European values. From this perspective, Conrad doesn't aim to use Africa as a foil through "which Europe's own state of spiritual grace

will be manifest” (2), as Achebe contends. In Conrad’s novel, the treatment of Africans by colonizers like Kurtz reveals Europe’s own spiritually and ideologically distorted state. Kurtz’s civilization and enlightenment can only be spread and maintained through violence.

In his article, Lackey correctly traces a continuum between the Kurtz of commerce and civilization and the Kurtz of spike heads and unspeakable rites, but Lackey’s focus on the connection between the Judeo-Christian tradition and imperialist brutality constricts his critical perspective. He argues “that morality is an empty signifier, a semiotic vacuity that dominant political powers can strategically manipulate in order to justify crimes against humanity” (21). It is exactly because morality, a historically and geographically determined notion of the good and the bad, lacks a defining structure that it can attach itself to any contemporaneous ideology, whether allegedly religious or overtly political. While it is logical to attribute Kurtz’s ideology to his Judeo-Christian heritage since he is an advocate of traditional European values, this does not mean that genocide justifying moral arguments cannot be found in more avowedly secular political ideologies.

#### From Dreams of Eden to the Gulag: Camus’ Philosophical History of Rebellion

As Albert Camus shows in *The Rebel* (1951), his philosophical analysis of radical rebellion from the French to the Soviet revolutions, the road from utopian ideals of human progress and improved civilization to arbitrary murder and genocide can be travelled by those on the secular left as well those on the religious right. It is the fall from utopian grace to genocidal rampage articulated in Camus’ work that connects the fictional account of Kurtz to historical accounts of Stalin. Appearing in France less than a decade after the horrors of the Nazis came to full light and while accounts of the crimes committed by Stalin in the name of the workers’ paradise still seeped out of the Soviet sphere, Camus attempted to understand a century that had begun in Europe with so much promise, but had turned into one of the bloodiest in the continent’s history. For Camus, the book was not only a long essay on history and political philosophy, it was a way “to face the reality of the present” (3). The book focuses on rebels and movements of rebellion that were utopian, that attempted to radically transform the cultural foundations of their societies along with their institutional structures. The book doesn’t focus on rebellions that had limited goals from the outset, for example the restoration of an ousted monarch, or revolutionary movements that, like the American Revolution, were tied to moderation because of their leadership’s distrust of human nature and of the power of radical reform to improve it. In his book, Camus explains why movements that had begun with utopian hopes of universal justice and fraternity had degenerated into mass murder. In doing so, he traces a line in the figure of the rebel from the Romantics, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to dictators, like Maximilien Robespierre and Joseph Stalin, who benefited from revolutions that had begun with the promise of justice and equality for all. For Camus, the rebel, like a good utopian, says no to present conditions and yes to a theoretically better, future alternative: “Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition” (10). The rebel is a being of positive negation. He or she denies justification for what is, and seeks the destruction of the current state of conditions in the name of a more just alternative.

The turn of the rebel from liberator to oppressor, and of liberation movements from utopian rites of emancipation to totalitarian mechanisms of oppression can be traced to the impossibility of the utopian alternative to maintain the same structural purity in practice as it once held in theory. Eventually, utopian rebels pick up the same whips they once knocked away



from the hands of the oppressor to lash out in their demands for “order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral.” In the perpetual attempt to establish a new, perfect order, the rebel justifies continual murder and destruction. Camus could be writing about Stalin by name when he states that the rebel “forgets his origins and, by the law of spiritual imperialism, he sets out in search of world conquest by way of an infinitely multiplied series of murders” (103). When confronted with the failure of their ideals to completely transform reality, rebels from the time of the French revolution to the Soviet revolution have concluded that reality is at fault.

For the rebel, the troublesome vestiges of the past must be eradicated for the good of the whole. The wrath of the rebel is never more chilling than when confronted with vestigial creeds of the old system held on to by those the act of rebellion claimed to liberate. This in part explains the wrath of Stalin and the Politburo against the kulaks, those peasants who held on to the notion of private ownership of livestock and plots of land. In his attempt to collectivize the land and to eliminate the last remnants of capitalism in Soviet farming, Stalin unleashed a campaign of persecution against so-called rich kulaks throughout the 1930s. According to J. Archer Getty’s “Excesses Are Not Permitted,” from mid-1937 to the end of 1938 alone, “767,397 had been sentenced by summary troikas: 386,798 to death and the remainder to terms in GULAG camps” (113). This was part of an almost decade long campaign to collectivize Soviet farming and industrialize the Soviet economy, which resulted in mass deaths through executions and through the bureaucratically indifferent starvation of the countryside. As Monettefiore puts it, “these Bolsheviks hated the obstinate world of the peasants: they had to be herded into collective farms, their grain forcibly collected and sold abroad to fund a manic gallop to create an instant industrial powerhouse” (37). The worker’s paradise could not exist without the industrial workers that Marx had deemed the fundamental component for the realization of communist utopia.

### The Utopian Strain in Scientific Marxism

Marxists may balk at the assertion that the utopian strain in Marxism was responsible for the crimes of Stalin and the Bolshevik system. They may counter that Marx and Engels were staunch critics of what they deemed the utopian socialism of competitors like Charles Fourier, Robert Owens, and Henri de Saint-Simon. However, as David Leopold argues in “Socialism and the Rejection of Utopia” the differences between Scientific Marxism and utopian socialism are not as clear cut as they may first seem. For Leopold, “although utopia is not necessarily socialist, socialism is always utopian” (223). In order to effectively criticize the present injustices brought about by the capitalist system and its unequal distribution of wealth, every form of socialism must provide a vision of a different, better way to be attained in a not-so-distant future. The differences between one form of socialism and another in regards to utopian dreams is a matter of degree not of substance.

Some forms of socialism have provided more details than others as to what the utopian future would look like, but they all have advocated a utopian vision. Marx and Engels could skew details as to what life would be like under communism because of their progressive theory of history. As Leopold contends, “Marx and Engels appear to think that questions of socialist design are redundant because optimal solutions to the social and political problems of humankind are *immanent* in the historical process” (233). While a *non-scientific* socialist like Fourier complemented his critique of capitalism with creative visions that detailed hour by hour the schedule of laborers within his ideal community, Marx and Engels believed that the

inevitable progress of history would take care of the details of their communist society. According to Leopold, for Marx and Engels, there was no point in speculating about what this society would look like in practice because its ultimate structure would be determined by the culmination of history. This perspective is still utopian. It conforms to the utopian undercurrent Leopold finds in all forms of socialism: “socialism contains both a critique of existing arrangements and an alternative vision of what might replace them.” (221). Marxism criticized present capitalist conditions, called for revolution to facilitate historical progression towards a communist future, and had a vision of that future that included certain principles such as the mass control of the means of production and the equal distribution of wealth. That Marx and Engels didn’t go as far as to predict exactly how the means of production would be operated under common ownership and how the equal distribution of wealth would be achieved doesn’t mean their vision lacked utopianism.

Marx and Engels vision of the progressive advance of history toward universal communism does mean that their theory was designed to be completed later by the vision of men advocating universal social change in specific historical, regional, and cultural contexts. The designs of these latter-day revolutionary philosophers didn’t always match the original vision of the founders. For example, Marxist theory set forth their view of the social-economic development of humanity through the ages, culminating in communism. This developmental blueprint set forth when and where communist revolutions would take place. There had to be a certain advance stage of capitalism within a given society before the revolution could succeed. For this reason, Marx and Engels envisioned the first communist revolution happening in England or Germany, not in a quasi-feudal society like tsarist Russia. Thus, the Bolsheviks had to engage in desperate and sometimes incoherent policies to speed up industrial development and create the social classes that were deemed necessary to hasten the founders’ vision of communist utopia. This created a revolutionary atmosphere that was perfect for the persecution and elimination of those who would not comply with the changes required or those, like the kulaks, whose very existence seemed antithetical to the successful transformation desired.

The kulaks served as just one of many escape goats for the failure of Soviet reality to match Marxist utopian theory. During his regime, Stalin unleashed his murderous rampage against technical experts who became “wreckers” when Soviet industry exhibited dangerous inefficiencies; against whole categories of minority populations, such as Finns, Poles, German, and Jews, accused of allegiance to one or another foreign power; against his former friends and allies in the Politburo, who when convenient were accused of treason; and in the end, self-defeating like a good Romantic rebel, he lashed out against the very doctors who could have prolonged his dictatorial reign.

### Stalin as Historical Rorschach Test

Confronted with a Stalin who actively seeks so many enemies and induces so much chaotic and destructive persecution even in the midst of an existential war against Hitler’s Germany, historians seem bewildered by the Soviet dictator. Their approach to Stalin and his regime can be divided into two large schools of thought. One is the “intentionalist” school. This line of thinking goes back to Conquest’s early account of Stalin’s crimes, and manifests itself in decidedly anti-Stalinist works like Nikolai Tolstoy’s *Stalin Secret War* (1981) in which the dictator wields extraordinary influence not only in Soviet territory but in a spy-saturated Nazi Germany and in a gullible Western Europe. The “intentionalists” broadly posit that Stalin deliberately initiated the various terror campaigns of his regime, encouraging the country’s

security services in order to create an all-powerful state with him at the head. A more recent line of thinking on Stalin's regime, known as "structuralism," finds sources in the release of previously classified KGB documents that reveal much about the workings of the Soviet Union. This line of thinking is exemplified in works like Robert W. Thurston's *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (1997), Getty's "Excesses Are Not Permitted," and Goldman's *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*. In his review of the Thurston book, Alan Wood defines this approach to Stalin's regime as one that examines "the interplay between state and society, by investigating the lives, responses and attitudes of 'ordinary' citizens, and by focusing its attention, not on ideology, politics, or personality, but on social groups and structures at grassroots and local levels" (84). "Structuralists" contend that Stalin and the Soviet people, having emerged from a bloody civil war and having been threatened by foreign powers in the early days of the revolution, feared the presence of foreign-supported enemies within the country. These historians further claim that since many of those caught in Stalin's dragnet were ethnic minorities and/or high to middle-ranking members of the communist party there was a certain mass appeal to these campaigns. Getty argues that the oppressiveness of the regime "point[s] to the importance of the structure of the system to an understanding of events. These terror campaigns had constituencies behind them outside of Moscow" (137). These "constituencies" in Goldman's more nuanced reading of history were formed by mass hysteria: "The terror was not simply a targeted surgical strike 'from above' aimed at the excision of oppositionists and perceived enemies, but a mass, political panic that profoundly reshaped relationships in every institution and workplace" (8). Between "intentionalists" and "structuralists" the explanations shift from the personal to the social, from amateur psychological assessments of the dictator's paranoia (and that of the Soviet peoples) to almost apologetic rationalizations for a regime threatened by real enemies.

In his account of the changing historical reputation of Stalin in the over 50 years since his death, Geoffrey Roberts demonstrates a not uncommon disjointed assessment of the dictator's legacy. Roberts asserts that "the detailing of Stalin's crimes is an important task of historical research, but the greater challenge for historians is the assessment of his contradictory record and legacy" ("Joseph Stalin," 48). Roberts provides a list of faults along with achievements. He states, for example, "Soviet communism lost the political and economic competition with western capitalism but the advanced industrial socialist state created by Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s survived for nearly seven decades." This is jarring because it is well known now that millions of lives were wasted in Stalin's push to industrialize the Soviet Union. It would be difficult to imagine a respected scholar praising Hitler for saving Germany's economy and providing healthy "Aryans" with a benevolent social welfare system as a way of balancing our assessment of the German dictator in the face of our knowledge of his death camps. The ambivalence of historians toward Stalin can be pegged to the gap between the ideals of communism and the oppressive reality of Stalinism. Their approach calls for a broader philosophical perspective from which to make sense of the dictator's actions.

### Stalin, Kurtz, and Camus' Utopian Rebels

Stalin is the self-consuming rebel, the one who denies the old system and ends up denying reality because acts in the murky world in which we live refuse to comply with the pristine theory he holds up as the only salvation. Camus writes of this nihilistic stage of utopian rebellion, "in the moment of lucidity, when we simultaneously perceive the legitimacy of this rebellion and its futility, the frenzy of negation is extended to the very thing that we claimed to

be defending” (83). No matter how hard the rebel works, his or her utopia will never arrive. Not content with eliminating the most egregious elements of the old system, the utopian rebel will continue to look for ways of creating the world anew, whether by eliminating stubborn peasants or by brutally killing recalcitrant natives. Though fueled by a positive vision of what could be, the utopian rebel becomes an actor trapped in constant negation: “Not being able to atone for injustice by the elevation of justice, we choose to submerge it in an even greater injustice, which is finally confounded with annihilation.” This is the philosophical explanation for Stalin’s action, and the essential idea embodied in Conrad’s depiction of Kurtz’s reign in the Congo.

Kurtz’s vision of utopia was ideologically different than the ones held by Stalin and the others mentioned in Camus’ *The Rebel*. As Lackey makes clear, Kurtz was working from a vision that would impose traditional European civilization upon every corner of the planet. Kurtz saw this process of imposition as ultimately benevolent, as a way of bringing the light of civilization to the darkness of barbarity. As he puts it in his report to the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, “by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (45). These are the words of a utopian dreamer. Kurtz expresses the dream of a theory, of an ideology, that can impose benevolence upon reality without constraints. In this sense, though depicted as a man who believes in tradition, Kurtz still rebels. Someone who holds on to a utopian dream unblemished by contact with the world is in rebellion, struggling against what *is* in the name of what *could be*.

The frenzy of insisting upon the utopian dream in the face of chaotic reality explains much of the eloquence and charisma of rebels like Kurtz and Stalin. Though depicted as a man of the nineteenth century, Kurtz’s magnetism anticipates the charismatic, demagogic leaders who dominated the twentieth century. Many characters in the novel speak about Kurtz’s talent for holding people’s attention and their loyalty. The Russian admirer of Kurtz insists to Marlow, “You don’t talk with the man – you listen to him” (49). This talent for rhetorical hypnotism leads the acolyte to excuse Kurtz’s murderous rage against him because “You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no!” (51). The fictional Russian sounds like a predecessor of the nonfictional Vyacheslav Mikhailovic Molotov, Stalin’s longest surviving associate, defending the reputation of the long deceased dictator until his own death in the mid-1980s, despite the fact that Stalin arrested and exiled his beloved wife, Polina. Kurtz’s old journalist colleague elucidates the underlying political and psychological advantages of a charisma that can enthrall its victims: “He electrified large meetings. He had faith—don’t you see? He had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything – anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party” (67). The rhetorical justification of the genocidal actor, whether from the left or the right, must carry the poetic power to make the ongoing act of murders palatable to himself and to his followers. Thus, mass murder necessitates charisma.

Though Stalin is said to have lacked the rhetorical flourishes attributed to a Kurtz, it was in part the cultivated simplicity of the Bolshevik’s language that garnished the trust and loyalty of the lower cadres of the communist party against the more bombastic Trotsky. Stalin’s triumph over his rival shows us the truths of that common admonishment of composition instructors who tell us, simple language can be more effective and powerful than complex linguistic flourishes. Stalin, furthermore, didn’t lack in other attractive qualities. After all, if he didn’t have the quality to attract and maintain the loyalty of others, his reign would have come to a short end at the hand of the powerful comrades he set to persecute. Montefiore describes Stalin as “mercurial—far from a humorless drone: he was convivial and entertaining, if exhaustingly intense” (49). This description could have easily been worded by Marlow regarding Kurtz.

## Conclusion

I began this article with an account of how the term utopia has been shrunk in certain academic circles to mean nothing more than a critique of present social conditions and a vague hope for a better future. I have argued that philosophical and political studies of utopia should return to an understanding of the term that includes conscious proposals of what the better future would be like. My argument is that when those visions of the better future are analyzed closely we see that attempts at implementation will produce dystopian results. This transition from utopia to dystopia has been exemplified in works of imagination such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in small communities such as those studied by Lucy Sargisson, and in the history of Stalinism. I devoted much space to the novel, but serious academic enterprise of comparing and contrasting the historical Stalin with Conrad's Kurtz, sometimes employing literary analysis to historical narratives on Stalinism and other times applying a historical analysis to Conrad's fictional creation, because this methodology can unearth and highlight the strain of nihilism that dwells within each utopian vision.

A critical understanding of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz elucidates accounts of Joseph Stalin's reign over the Soviet Union. Through his portrayal of Kurtz, Conrad warned the world about the murderous nihilism that frustrated utopian visions will unleash. Most historical accounts of Stalin read as ambivalent assessments of his reign or angry, choppy litanies of his crimes because they lack an understanding of the profound wisdom Conrad revealed in his novella. When first reading accounts of the Soviet Union under Stalin, the reader's head spins and the spirit drops as he or she witnesses a bloody merry-go-round without end. Only voracious, mass spread fears and appetites seem to stand at the center of the disparate crimes committed under Stalinism. The reader of historical accounts of Nazism may close the book in a state of depression for the cruelty humanity can unleash upon itself, but at least he or she may feel some certainty in knowing that racism, the delineation of the human species into hierarchical categories, is the evil to be fought. There is no clear ideology to confront if we take contemporary historical accounts of Stalinism at face value. Socialism by itself cannot take on the role that racism, or anti-Semitism, plays in histories of Nazism. If the concentration camp appears to be the culmination of anti-Semitic pogroms and other forms of European on European ethnic violence, the Gulags do not at first glance appear to be the inevitable consequence of hundreds of years of socialist dreaming and theorizing. When we view the reign of Stalin through the more tangible prism of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we see that any large scale attempt at utopia, whether Christian or Marxist, will inevitably lead to mass murder.

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