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The Totalitarian Society as a Literary Image: A Comparative Perspective

Abstract: This article explores the literary representation of totalitarian societies in selected works of Czech, Slovak, and Polish prose fiction written after 1918. Focusing on the cultural and ideological legacies of authoritarian regimes in Central Europe, the study proposes a comparative framework that accounts for historical, linguistic, and aesthetic specificities. It argues that literary texts not only document repression and control, but also reflect divergent strategies of adaptation, resistance, and memory-making. Drawing on approaches from hermeneutics, historical poetics, and narratology, the analysis moves beyond national canons to include marginal, minority, and exilic literatures. A three-level model – contextual, textual, and interpretive – is proposed to examine how totalitarian experience is articulated through narrative form, character construction, and language. The article contends that totalitarian society, as rendered in literature, is not only a political structure but a cultural trauma, shaping both authorial voice and reader reception across generations.

Keywords: totalitarianism; Central European literature; Czech prose; Slovak prose; Polish literature; comparative literature; narrative strategy; cultural memory; resistance; literary canon; minority writing

Introduction to the Problem¹

The literary production of the independent states that emerged from former Czechoslovakia and Poland after 1918 opens up a rich field of inquiry – not only for tracing the trajectories of national literary developments, but more fundamentally for exploring the ways in which authors from these regions have engaged with the experience of totalitarianism. A comparative approach to fiction written under the constraints of authoritarian rule offers a valuable perspective on divergent cultural memories, narrative strategies, and ethical positions that have shaped both authorial self-understanding and the broader reception of literature.

Yet, such an undertaking is necessarily fraught with methodological and interpretive complications. One must reckon with substantial differences in historical context and institutional infrastructure, as well as the specificities of language, censorship, and the varying configurations of collaboration and resistance. Totalitarianism, after all, does not present itself as a singular or monolithic phenomenon; its internal mechanisms and outward expressions shift according to the regime, period, and locale in question. Likewise, the formal and generic contours of literary responses to totalitarianism require careful and differentiated analysis.

The complex internal stratification of literary production during the totalitarian decades – ranging from state-sanctioned works, through clandestine or samizdat publications, to the literature of exile and the ambiguous “grey zone” of texts produced under compromise – shall also be noted. Each of these zones carries its own tensions and inter-

¹ The initial impetus for the research and the selection of the topic came from Professor Libor Pavera, the academic supervisor of the author of this study. During the admissions process for the doctoral program at the University of Bielsko-Biala, the author chose this theme and was accepted by the committee. The present article constitutes one of the first methodological reflections on how to approach a comparative topic that mirrors the intricate cultural and historical dynamics of Central Europe in the twentieth century.

pretive demands. This study sets out to examine how the structures and legacies of totalitarian power are represented in selected works of Polish, Czech, and Slovak fiction; how writers have thematised domination, repression, and resistance; and how such texts contribute – both in their time and in retrospect – to the formation of collective memory.

The Totalitarian Community as a Literary Construct

The concept of a totalitarian community has become a central category in the study of modern authoritarian regimes. It describes not merely a political order, but an entire social configuration in which the lives of individuals are subject to total state control. Such control extends beyond public institutions into the private sphere, seeking to regulate culture, economic life, religion, and even the most intimate domains of thought, emotion, and personal relationships. In such a context, the individual is not an autonomous moral or political subject, but a functionary of the state's ideological and disciplinary apparatus.

The defining features of a totalitarian community may be summarised as follows:

- the state's absolute supremacy over the individual;
- the imposition of ideological uniformity through propaganda and censorship;
- a monopoly of political power, maintained by a single ruling party and the systematic suppression of dissent;
- the pervasive indoctrination of the populace;
- a climate of fear, sustained by surveillance and the ever-present threat of repression;
- and the dissolution of the boundary between public and private life, whereby family, friendship, and intimacy become sites of political scrutiny.

These dynamics were most extensively realised in the political systems of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and have been analysed

in foundational theoretical works. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,² Hannah Arendt explores the collapse of traditional social and moral structures under the weight of ideological myth-making and mass atomisation, arguing that totalitarian regimes isolate individuals from one another while rendering them obedient through bureaucratic mobilisation and terror. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski,³ in their typology of totalitarian rule, stress the structural ambition of such regimes to achieve total penetration and transformation of society.

For literary scholarship, however, the totalitarian community is not simply an object of description. In contrast, it constitutes a representational field – a discursive and imaginative construct through which writers negotiate their relation to power, ideology, and historical experience. Fictional texts do not merely chronicle repression; they also dramatise the psychological interiority of submission, the ethical ambiguity of compromise, and the tacit codes of silence. They expose the fractures within imposed uniformity, commonly deploying allegory or narrative displacement (or other literary devices, such as irony) to articulate what could not be said directly.

Indeed, the literary engagement with totalitarianism is frequently less concerned with ideological confrontation than with the experience of living under conditions of extreme constraint. Through narrative, authors recover not only facts, but also gestures, hesitations, refusals—the minute textures of existence within systems designed to obliterate subjectivity. Literature thus, from such a standpoint, functions as both a

² ARENDT, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951. See Chapter 12: “Totalitarianism in Power.” Available online: https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/arendt_originsoftotalitarianism.pdf

³ FRIEDRICH, Carl J. and Zbigniew K. BRZEZIŃSKI, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956, esp. pp. 22–23. Available online: https://faculty.washington.edu/sangok/NorthKorea/Friedrich%2C_Carl_and_Zbigniew_Brzezinski_-_Totalitarian_Dictatorship_and_Autocracy.pdf

document and a medium of memory, offering insights into the lived realities of repression and the subtle grammars of resistance.

Inner Conflict and Cultural Trauma

It is in literature, perhaps more than in any other form of cultural expression, that the internal tensions of life under totalitarianism are most vividly rendered. Through narrative, authors explore the subtle and often painful oscillation between loyalty and subversion, between social conformity and moral dissent, between outward compliance and inward freedom. The totalitarian community, in this light, is not merely an ideal type – it is also a cultural trauma, a historically situated experience whose echoes continue to reverberate long after the fall of the regimes that produced it.

As such, the theme of the totalitarian community serves as a powerful analytical key for reading Central European fiction of the second half of the twentieth century. It enables us to trace the articulation of history through literary means, while also opening up broader questions of morality, personal autonomy, memory, and responsibility.

Research Problem and Methodology

At the core of this study lies a fundamental question: how does literary fiction respond to the specific historical experience of totalitarianism, and in what ways does it represent that experience? In the cases of Czechoslovakia and Poland, this experience encompasses not only political and social control, but also cultural indoctrination, censorship, enforced loyalty, and – crucially – both self-censorship and exile. Literary responses to such conditions have been varied, evolving alongside shifts in political practice and across generational lines. Methodologically, the study is grounded in the interdisciplinary framework of literary comparatism, drawing on thematic analysis, historical poetics, hermeneutics, and narratology.

The research proceeds through close readings of selected prose texts by Czech, Slovak, and Polish authors, with particular attention to:

- the representation of totalitarian mechanisms – ideology, violence, surveillance, propaganda;
- the typology of characters and their responses to pressure – ranging from conformity to inner exile to active resistance;
- the linguistic and compositional strategies employed to aestheticize, ironize, or allegorize totalitarian experience.

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Special emphasis is placed on how memory – both personal and collective – is inscribed into the literary fabric, and on the positioning of the reader: to what extent is the literary text a vehicle for historical understanding, critical distance, or the reconstruction of identity?

The Question of Corpus and Canon

One of the most delicate issues in any comparative study of the literatures of former Czechoslovakia and Poland is the selection of texts and authors. The very term “Czechoslovak literature” must be understood as a historically contingent construct rather than a linguistically or aesthetically unified field. While notions of cultural unity between Czechs and Slovaks were officially promoted during the interwar and postwar periods, the linguistic realities of the region did not reflect such unity. The concept of a “Czechoslovak language” – invoked, for example, by T. G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš – had primarily a symbolic-political rather than communicative function.

In practice, literary circulation routinely crossed linguistic boundaries: Slovak literature was read in the Czech lands, Polish prose found readers in regions such as Teschen Silesia and among university-educated audiences, and German-language writers had its own essential role in the urban cultures of multilingual cities. This areal and stratified context calls for a complex approach, one that resists the reductive gesture of relying solely on canonical “great names” of national literatures. The central question thus becomes: should the comparative analysis focus on canonised authors whose work has already been extensively interpreted and institutionalised, or should it rather highlight marginal

figures – writers whose position in the literary field remains peripheral, yet who offer valuable perspectives shaped by ethnic origin, regional background, or direct experience of repression?

This article opts for a combined strategy. Alongside the analysis of established works that have become integral to national memory and literary education, it also seeks to engage with lesser-known texts whose marginal status may prove interpretively fertile. Here, marginality is understood not only in geographic terms, but also in discursive terms – as works that have been excluded due to ideological nonconformity, aesthetic deviance, or lack of accessibility to mass readership. The goal is to reconstruct as wide a spectrum as possible of literary responses to the experience of totalitarian power.

Thematic Analysis: Representing Totalitarian Order within a Culturally Heterogeneous Space

The representation of totalitarian regimes in Central European literature is not merely a record of historical repression; it also reflects the culturally distinct ways in which societies have grappled with that experience. In the case of former Czechoslovakia, the contrast between the state's declared unity and its internal linguistic, national, and cultural plurality is particularly striking. This pluralism had a direct impact on the literary portrayal of power, resistance, and societal normalization—and simultaneously complicates any straightforward comparison with the relatively more homogeneous Polish tradition.

In Polish prose, a strong current of moral and philosophical reflection on dictatorship began to take shape as early as the 1950s, with writers such as Andrzej Szczypiorski, Tadeusz Konwicki, and Jerzy Andrzejewski. By contrast, Czech and Slovak literature tended toward more fragmentary responses: irony (Škvorecký), allegory (Hrabal, Klíma), satire (in the tradition of Hašek), or introspective fiction (Rudolf Šloboďa, Dominik Tatarka). Totalitarianism here is not always depicted as a monolithic apparatus of control, but often as a contradictory, dif-

fuse, and internally unstable system in which the individual navigates an ambivalent space between adaptation and resistance.

When we take into account the significance of location and linguistic area – such as Slovak authors writing in Hungarian, or Czech women writers living in the Teschen region – it becomes clear that literary representations of totalitarianism are frequently shaped by regional experience. In some instances, social pressure appears less as ideological force from the political center and more as the coercion of cultural norms or the dynamics of ethnic conflict. In others, it emerges as the traumatic imprint of collective silence.

From this perspective, it becomes quite clear that the selection of texts for analysis must not be guided solely by thematic relevance, but must also attend to linguistic and cultural horizons. Crucial points of comparison are to be found not only in the treatment of power and repression, but also in narrative voice, language use, structure, and the degree of openness or coded indirection with which experience is conveyed.

Comparative Challenges within a Plural Cultural Space

Any comparative analysis of literature produced in Central Europe after 1918 is immediately confronted by a fundamental question: what exactly is being compared? If we begin with national literatures – Czech, Slovak, Polish – we risk reducing a richly layered and historically complex cultural space to overly tidy categories. The territory of former Czechoslovakia was home to a multilingual mosaic of literary expression: texts were written not only in Czech, Slovak, and Polish, but also in Hungarian, German, Yiddish, Romani, and Rusyn. Many of these literatures developed with a high degree of autonomy, while simultaneously contributing to a shared, if contested, cultural landscape.

This plurality is not merely a linguistic fact; it carries significant implications for literary form, reception, and interpretation. It poses a challenge to any method that would rely on rigid national frameworks, and it demands a more nuanced approach – one that recognises the

dynamic interplay between dominant and minority traditions, between central narratives and their margins, between literary institutions and the counter-publics they often sought to suppress.

Just as the historical trajectory of the three – at times somewhat artificially paired into two – Central European literatures was complex, ambiguous, and winding, so too is the contemporary effort to recover, reconstruct, and interpret their historical meanings. Literary texts do not merely reflect history; they refract it in layered, and often paradoxical, ways. It is precisely this multiplicity of meaning that presents both a challenge and a justification for continuous return – to read them not only as aesthetic artefacts, but as forms of testimony, memory, and human orientation in a world shaped by conflict and change.

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Beata Kozieł was born in Karviná in the Czech Republic. She graduated from the University of Ostrava, where she studied Polish, Czech and Spanish Philology and Global History. During her research work, she carried out six-month internships in Spain (Málaga), Germany (Passau), Poland (Wrocław and Katowice) and conducted dialectological research in Russian Siberia. Her academic background combines Bohemian studies, with a focus on linguistic and literary phenomena, and foreign language pedagogy, particularly in Spanish, Czech and Polish. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree with a dissertation that compares Polish, Slovak, and Czech literatures, with a special emphasis on the literary representation of totalitarian societies. She professionally works as a court interpreter of Polish language.

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