

# The Destructive Draw of Historical Determinism

Jared Russell

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jacob Graham

Bridgewater College, Department of Philosophy and Religion

## Historical Determinism

Historical determinism can be understood as the idea that future events are predestined, usually by an esoteric or economic force. This is accompanied by the belief that there is a certain group of enlightened people that know what this future outcome will be. These people are also often convinced that it is their duty to help bring about this historical synthesis. While there are different iterations of historical determinism that can be critiqued, this paper will be focusing on some of the most influential. Specifically, the connection between a historical determinism as imagined by Hegel which was then adapted into Marxist-Leninism and later Stalinism; the racial philosophy that motivative Nazism; and the fundamentalist religious apocalypticism that lies behind some versions of Christianity and Islam. This historical determinist viewpoint in these ideologies gives its adherents the belief that they hold the moral high ground, that victory is inevitable, and that their opposition is merely obstacles to the ideal society that is to come.



## Philosophical Roots

### **Immanuel Kant**

A large part of the philosophy of history behind historical determinism is based upon the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant, in his 1784 work *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, laid out the idea that there is perhaps a regular movement in history that has a path unwritten by individual actors. In this work, Kant anthropomorphizes “Nature” imbuing it with a sense of agency, to produce and guide. This aspect of Kant’s work can be tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition, as Kant states that Nature gives man free will, and has created the environment in such a way that it will constantly challenge and drive humanity forward in a teleological sense. Kant is explicitly using religious gesturing to combine traditional notions of providence with the secularized language of nature. The final purpose of this literal force of Nature is the creation of a perfect universal society, which requires the whole of humanity to join together.

### **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**

Hegel takes Kant’s basic idea of historical trends revealing something more than the mere sum of human action and adds onto it, increasingly emphasizing the conflictual nature of the process. Hegel did not see human beings in a stagnant sense, locked between their split brutish and rational nature as Kant maintained. Hegel had the idea of a dialectic where two sides opposed one another and then clashed until a resolution was found, or one of the sides was destroyed. This is his language of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. He applied this idea to history in his *Philosophy of History*, where he outlines changes in historical trends over time starting with the Greeks’ society being changed by Socrates’ questioning of their societal norms and understandings. Hegel’s metaphysics and historical dialectic are both tied to his idea of Spirit. Absolute Spirit is what Hegel calls the ultimate reality, God, or Freedom. The Spirit can be known through pure reason and thoughtful cognition, as self-consciousness is the subjective form of spirit existing in the world. For the individual, religion is the vector of one’s life through which they can get closest to Spirit because religion recognizes the True in its most real, abstract, form. The religion that a group of people have is the fundamental agreement on which they base their governance. In this way, Spirit, for Hegel, also takes an objective form in the State which “is the Idea of Spirit in the external manifestation of human Will and its Freedom”. He identifies it as such because the state is the union of the will of all of the individuals that make it up. Because the state is such a powerful entity, it is in the development of the State through history that Spirit can most readily be seen.

Hegel combines these ideas and uses the idea of Spirit as a guiding principle behind the State, which is a collective rather than individual will, to say that different societies with varying religions and forms of governance have National Spirits which each are at different levels of development in and unity with Absolute Spirit. Spirit, on the world stage, acts as the “latent germ of being — a capacity or potentiality striving to realize itself” that he calls the principle of development. History is a teleological process guided by Spirit that manifests itself through the religion of groups of people collectivized into the State, which through a dialectical process eventually will move towards Freedom.

Hegel’s ideas of a historical dialectic paired with his teleological view of history were extremely influential. They would later be used to change the world when they were taken up by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, mixed with economics, and shifted to fit the materialistic, rather than idealist view of the world that Marx had.

## Communism

Instead of reason through religion being driven by spirit through history, Marx envisioned that it was capital, manifested in class, and how it was produced and distributed within a society which was the way that development happened throughout history. Though Marx would also claim that the telos of this spirit that drives history was Freedom, he posits that it is those in control of capital, the bourgeoisie, that are acting in opposition to the march of history, Spirit, and trying to maintain their position of dominance over the proletariat class. He saw the dialectic in work through history as Feudalism gave way to Capitalism, which in turn was destined to give way to Communism as more people recognized the position they were in and sought freedom.

The theory, as laid out in the Communist Manifesto, was that capitalism has begun to “draw all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization” while undermining traditional national means of production. This new massive amount of uncontrolled production would inevitably lead to greater and greater commercial crises which would destroy large sections of the productive forces. These destructive forces will be felt most acutely by the proletariat, who is forced to work ever harder in low wage and low skill jobs to keep up with the machines. Marx and Engels’ see the lives of the lower class becoming consistently worse despite the general increase in capital. The continuation of this trend will mean that the proletariat will long for the status that skilled workers had in the Middle ages and come together to destroy imported goods, machines, and finally the bourgeoisie in revolution. Some enlightened members of the bourgeoisie and the middle class will even assist the proletariat in this revolution, having the ability to see the auspicious historical situation. The lower middle class specifically is likely to help, knowing that they will soon fall into the proletariat anyway. Unlike in the past where revolutions were always championed by some subsection of the bourgeoisie, this revolution, being led by a conscious majority of the oppressed will allow the proletariat to rise together afterwards. Furthermore, being one class there will not be class oppression with the destruction of the bourgeoisie and the middle class that did not side with the proletariat in the revolution. “Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable”.



Revolution, which was in the way the dialectical struggle played out in the Marxist conception of the world, was a difficult process. Though history was on the side of the proletariat and a utopian society of freedom would eventually be reached, capital, and through it, material power, was often in the hands of the bourgeois. This caused later political leaders such as Vladimir Lenin to devise ways through which the bourgeois can be overthrown in an accelerated manner. This would come most famously in the form of a Vanguard party, which would consist of those epistemologically privileged individuals who are able to perceive reality and recognize their place in history. This group then sets out to mobilize the proletariats into revolutionary action, destabilize the social order, and establish itself as the guiding force within the state

This is exactly what happened in the formative example of the vanguard party which grew directly out from Lenin himself, the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were a communist vanguard political party founded by Lenin that led the fight against the Russian Republic and seized power in 1917 through Red October. Immediately upon taking power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks showed the deadly potential of their tactics by demonizing and calling for the murder of the Kulaks, resulting in mass food shortages in 1918. They would eventually shift into the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, most famously led by Stalin. The Soviet Union that was birthed from Marxist-Leninist philosophy ended up as an authoritarian system that ruled over the second largest number of governmental civilian killings in the 20th century.

In Marxist-Leninism, Nazism, and Millenarianism, a perspective of historical determinism lends itself towards violence and has been responsible for some of the biggest atrocities committed in the last 150 years. These ideas are dangerous because of the way they are able to both capture the imagination of a group of people that are seen as epistemologically privileged and destined for a future utopia, while simultaneously promoting a collectivist mentality that allows the trampling over of innumerable individuals. This gets particularly dangerous when believers take matters of bringing about this eschatological change themselves, as was the case in the three examples given. These dangerous tendencies most readily present themselves in the demonization of other members of society, and a focus on overthrowing the established social order. Out of all the groups that have been mentioned, a commonality is that their predictions have all been wrong. Though they claim history is on their side and that paradise awaits, a close study of history shows that no utopia has come, but rather violent adherents have caused mass suffering before themselves being purged by other members of their group, all destined not for earthly paradise, but for infamy in death. There is a strange irony in studying the results of actions said to be destined to meet their goals. Stalin watched as millions of workers were killed, starved, or sent to the gulag for not being loyal enough to the state. In order to create the conditions for a pure German Volk, Hitler sent an entire generation of Germans to die in a far-off land. Finally, in order to prove he found the Mahdi and usher in a golden age of Islamic rule, Juhayman desecrated the most holy site of his religion. In each case, the strength of their convictions was so great that they were willing to go to any length to impose their vision of the world on others, no matter who had to die.

## Nazi Race Theory

The stated goal of the Nazi party in Germany was very much in line with historical determinism and the belief that the spirit of a group was always developing towards a utopian end. Unlike the Soviets, who used economics and class as the basis for their claims, the Nazis used a theory of racial supremacy.

Following Hegel, Nazis put a massive emphasis on the importance of the National Spirit, which the Germans called Volk, encompassing the shared culture, language, and territory of a group. The idea of the Volk was further augmented by racial theories of Aryan supremacy, which were made most popular by Arthur de Gobineau in his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*. In this book he explicitly states that the racial types are, “absolutely fixed, hereditary, and permanent, in spite of climate and lapse of time.” Gobineau sees no equality between the three main racial types which he identifies as black, white and yellow. In beauty, strength, and intelligence, he argues that those closest to white are superior. The notion of the originals being pure is important to Gobineau’s overall narrative, which is that the intermingling of the types causes a degeneration of humanity and an increase in the disorder of the individual and larger society. Aryans, who are the purest white type remaining needed to be segregated, protected, and allowed to lead.



Gobineau’s ideas were taken by Houston Stewart Chamberlain and adjusted in his book *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* to fit German ideas of the Volk. This included classifying Semitic as its own race instead of as a part of white. Similar to Gobineau, Chamberlain thought that racial intermingling was the primary cause of the fall of civilizations. Going further, Chamberlain did not stop at claims of superiority and prescriptions of racial segregation. Chamberlain endorsed the destruction of groups that would challenge the superior race.

Using a combination of linguistics, social anthropology, and eugenics theory, the pretense of scientific racial superiority and the belief in a singular group with the ability to produce civilization, kickstarted calls for radical change. The Nazis thought they knew that the pure Volk would eventually dominate, but believed that the more time that lesser groups were allowed to coexist, the more likely they were to intermingle and corrupt the most noble type. The solution to this problem required vast, uncontested government power to implement. This was obtained by the Nazi Party in 1934 when Hitler took up the powers that Hindenburg had previously held and declared himself Fuehrer.

The activities of the Nazi Party after setting off World War II through their invasion of Poland, would eventually lead to the death of millions, including six million Jews throughout the area that Hitler was able to control as part of their plan to establish a utopia that would last a thousand years. Their belief was that the Aryan race was superior to all others and that it was the destiny of the German people to be the rulers of the world. In order to do this, they had to first get rid of all of those that were impure. They did this both through murder and eugenics, believing in this task so strongly that even in the final years of the war when defeat seemed imminent, precious resources were still being used to carry out their racial cleansing.

## Conclusion

It is not surprising that all of the groups have been wrong. Aside from the specific problems facing each of the cases given, historical determinism itself has issues. The scale of the proposed social changes, the violence required to force the rest of society to accept the changes, and the dubious methods that have been used for making predictions should all be understood. In each of the cases given success on the part of the revolutionaries would require a complete restructuring of civilization. The complexity that goes into ensuring a functioning society is such that only parts of its working can be understood at once, which is why studies isolate variables in order to know their effect. In trying to understand and mold all of society at one to fit their preconceived notions of the historical ends, historical determinists always run into unintended consequences. This is due to unforeseen interactions between parts of society that are unsettled by the rampant change. For every change made, a ripple effect will occur to social relations, whose change will then ripple again ad infinitum. This would require a similarly infinite knowledge to be able to successfully predict the outcome of, making holistic social change a logical impossibility. To be clear, in each of the examples adherents to historical determinism claim that change is predestined. However, they then attempt to impose themselves onto the social order to accelerate the course of history, which to anyone not convinced that this change is already determined looks like radical change.

## Millenarianism and the Mahdi

Millenarianism is the idea that in the future, there will be a fundamental remaking of the world and the social order as prescribed by a certain religion. After this pseudo-apocalypse, a utopia will be established on the earth for believers to enjoy. Millenarianism and other forms of apocalyptic ideologies whether religious or otherwise, can be extremely dangerous because followers can take the idea of a future destruction as permission to take that destruction into their own hands. “Apocalyptic belief systems and millennial visions of the imminent “Last Days” or “End Times” appear to characterize almost all violent religious sects” a fact that is crucial when looking at the practical ramifications of this philosophy.

One important aspect of millenarianism is that salvation and permittance into this utopian system is collective. All members of the chosen people will gain access; however, it is also a dualistic vision of the world. This means that those that are not part of the elect have chosen to side with the forces of evil in the world and will either be destroyed in the end times, or need to be destroyed to make way for the coming age. While most millenarianist groups today are fringe, like People’s Temple and Aum Shinrikyo, the ideas of communal salvation after a worldwide destruction of the forces of evil are common themes throughout the Abrahamic religion.

Islam has been the unfortunate source and victim of one of the most shocking examples of historical determinist groups trying to impose their will. Certain sects of Islam, believe in a form of historical determinism millenarianism in which a holy figure, called the Mahdi, who is destined to come to earth and destroy the forces of evil to create a perfect religio-political community, the *umma*, on earth. 1979, a small group of Wahhabi extremists believed they had found the Mahdi in a man named Muhammad Abdullah al-Qahtani who fit the descriptions given in the Hadiths. To force the rest of the prophecy, on 20 November 1979, the first day of 1400 of the Islamic calendar, an extremist leader named Juhayman, Muhammad Abdullah, and around 300 armed men stormed the Grand Mosque in Mecca and took thousands of Islamic worshippers hostage. After a two weeklong siege on the mosque by the Saudi government, the proposed Mahdi was dead along with hundreds of others. The remainder of Juhayman’s group was captured and either imprisoned or executed. There was no divine intervention on behalf of Muhammad Abdullah and the revolution failed horrifically.



## Work Cited

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e-KnxrejdxRq8plrIFFRQJ1rT6kehyeHV\\_TXrdto\\_c/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e-KnxrejdxRq8plrIFFRQJ1rT6kehyeHV_TXrdto_c/edit?usp=sharing)

Given that historical determinism favors a small in-group of enlightened followers, it requires the ability to clear obstacles and opponents from its path. The violence and control required to force this acceleration worsens the problem of unforeseen events. The death and destruction that results from the violence necessarily makes it more difficult for those implementing policy in accordance with their ideology to correct for anything that goes wrong. This is even more of a problem in the context of the devoted historical determinist who is willing to sacrifice untold numbers of individuals to reach their ends. Figures like Juhayman, Hitler, and Stalin, so convinced in the merits of their actions are unlikely to admit that anything can go wrong with their plans. So whatever course corrections might be possible in light of the destruction are ignored.

Finally, the predictive methods used to determine where exactly history is going in order to help bring about that change must be scrutinized on an individual level. The impossibility of total knowledge of a society means that a forceful outside authority must be referenced. In Juhayman’s case this was God; in Hitler’s it is racial superiority preordained by a cosmic force, in Stalin’s conception it was economics. Economic interests can surely have an effect on the development and progression of a society. Theoretically so could divine intervention or some disparity in physical or mental ability between racial groups. Crucially, the force of conviction behind the belief in the truth of these assertions allowed disproving evidence to be ignored to disastrous effect.