

**The Authoritarian Challenge:  
Liberal Thinking on Autocracy and International Relations, 1930-1941**

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**Abstract**

The return of authoritarian great powers, the slowing of the democratic wave, and outright reversion to authoritarian rule pose important questions for international theory. What are the implications of an international system populated with more autocracies? Precisely this question was posed by a diverse array of social scientists, public intellectuals and policy analysts in response to the autocratic wave in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. We show that a series of conversations emanating from quite diverse intellectual priors—from Christian realists, to international lawyers and disaffected Marxists—converged on the risks these regimes posed to international cooperation and peace. These risks included unconstrained rulers, an inability to sustain international commitments and political processes that undermined rational deliberation at home and spread disinformation abroad. These debates have direct implications for liberal arguments about the democratic peace. Rather than theorizing why democracies avoid war, however, they focus on why authoritarian and democratic countries are more prone to conflict.

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The debate about the democratic peace has proven one of the most extensive and consequential in the history of international relations theory. With a pedigree that goes back to Kant, this strand of thinking was revived in the postwar period by Michael Doyle through an observed regularity: that democracies don't fight one another.<sup>2</sup> An extensive body of scholarship subsequently sought to theorize this observed outcome, focusing on institutional constraints on rulers, the capacity to signal, and shared norms among other causal factors.<sup>3</sup> And democratic peace arguments worked their way into American and European foreign policies, as the number of democracies expanded from the 1970s through the end of the Cold War.

Yet democratic peace arguments suggest a corollary hypothesis: that democracies and autocracies are *more* likely to fight than democratic dyads. The effects of authoritarian rule on international politics, however, has received much less attention than the democratic peace. Unfortunately, the question is neither academic nor hypothetical. Russia and China are not simply major powers; they are authoritarian major powers.<sup>4</sup> The Third Wave of democratization has slowed, and we are witnessing a new era of democratic backsliding and outright “autocratization.”<sup>5</sup> What implications does a greater incidence of authoritarian regimes have for world politics?

The current period is not the first time the question has been posed. The aftermath of World War I—the Wilsonian moment—appeared to usher in a new democratic order. In 1920, only three of 29 European countries were authoritarian while the remainder could be categorized as some kind of democracy, however imperfect. By 1941, democracy had collapsed across the European continent, either as a result of internal stresses, autocratic conquest or both. The authoritarian wave did not go unnoticed. A variety of scholars—from quite diverse intellectual backgrounds—began to turn their attention to the international consequences. In doing so, they independently converged around ideas that fell broadly in the long-standing democratic peace tradition, but they did so through the lens of autocracy and its consequences.

The purpose of this article is to excavate a portion of this history, and in doing so to reconstruct what we believe constitute some neglected strands of liberal international relations theory. We do so by identifying a number of overlapping conversations on the issue of autocracy and international politics that begin in the 1930s and run through the end of World War II. By “conversations,” we mean something both sociological and analytic: circles or clusters of academics, intellectuals and policy analysts that shared some theoretical priors and were engaged in sustained debate over the meaning of the new authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> The three conversations we focus on here were chosen in part for their enduring intellectual impact, including with respect to both American foreign policy and international relations theory: the emergence of a Christian realist engagement with international politics; a wide-ranging body of work by international

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<sup>2</sup> Doyle 1983a, 1983b

<sup>3</sup> *inter alia*, Lake 1992; Russett 1993; Siverson 1995; Schultz 1998; Gelpi and Greisdorf 2001; Lipson 2003; but see also Gartzke 1998. Reiter 2017 provides a review

<sup>4</sup> Kroenig 2020

<sup>5</sup> Luhrmann et. al. 2018, Haggard and Kaufman 2021

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt 1998

lawyers on authoritarianism and legal commitments; and a debate on the left about the sources of Soviet conduct.

These theorists focused in part on institutional arguments that have been a staple of the democratic peace literature, albeit in inverted form. They note how the relatively unconstrained nature of authoritarian rule generated challenges to international order through adverse selection of leaders, granting dictators wide discretion to indulge their personal interests and worldviews and by eliminating political and social checks on their behavior. These domestic factors, in turn, generated credible commitment problems. However, this work also took up these themes in more novel, nuanced and expansive ways. For example, they explored the connections between institutional arrangements and norms and showed the effect of authoritarian rule on the integrity of international law. They even anticipated the current preoccupation with the relationship between regime type, disinformation and truth and the ways in which authoritarian regimes sought to undermine democracy abroad.

The first strand of work we discuss centered on a group of Christian realists—Tillich and Niebuhr the most prominent among them—that had a powerful influence on early realist thinkers. The self-interestedness of both democratic and authoritarian powers was treated as axiomatic, thus the “realism” in the Christian realist moniker. While by no means a liberal, Niebuhr nonetheless gradually came to see the unconstrained nature of authoritarian rule as a central challenge to international order and developed a qualified defense of democracy as a political system that moderated international ambitions. Despite being invoked as a precursor of an emergent realist tradition emphasizing systemic factors and international power politics, Niebuhr in fact saw domestic regime type—democracy and authoritarianism—as determinative of international order.

A second strand of debate grappled with the international consequences of authoritarian conceptions of law, with Carl Schmitt casting a long shadow over the debate. As in the postwar period, the interwar years saw an emergent push for international legalization.<sup>7</sup> However, students of comparative and international law showed that the new authoritarian regimes were not only skeptical of international legal constraints but rejected domestic constraints on state power as well. In the absence of such domestic checks, legal commitments were literally incredible, the opportunities for cooperation were necessarily limited and the likelihood of outright conflict more likely.

A final debate on the political left, exemplified in the work of Sidney Hook, engaged a swath of the American political spectrum ranging from Deweyian liberals to Trotskyists and the shrinking group of Communist Party loyalists. These debates had a particularly profound influence on Cold War liberalism. This conversation ran along two parallel tracks, one dealing with Soviet foreign policy, another centered on the nature of the Soviet political system. Although a student of Dewey’s, Hook’s political and intellectual trajectory initially took him into Marxism; in the late 1920s and early 1930s he was a committed revolutionary. Nonetheless, he

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<sup>7</sup> e.g. Hathaway and Shapiro 2017

gradually came to see democracy as foundational to his socialist commitments and became a biting critic of Soviet authoritarianism. This critique rested on what might be called “political epistemology,” which focused ultimately on the relationship between authoritarian rule, objectivity and truth itself. Unconstrained by political debate or challenge, authoritarian rulers sought to undermine not only dissent but rational discourse. Moreover, they did so not only at home but as a component of their foreign policies as well. As a consequence, authoritarian regimes posed a direct and even existential threat to democracy itself, and required a robust political response.

We start by setting the stage: reviewing both the rise of authoritarianism in the interwar period and the much wider literature from which are examples are drawn. We then turn to short outlines of the evolution of these three inquiries into autocracy and international relations. We define the scope of these conversations, their intellectual priors, and contributions—many unrecognized—to liberal IR theory.

The review has wider implications for the history of IR in the interwar period and immediately after. That history is usually presented as consisting of a “great debate” between idealists and realists, focusing on a handful of leading international relations scholars.<sup>8</sup> We join recent scholarship which casts doubt on whether the liberal IR scholarship should be seen as “idealist” and even whether the “great debate” took place at all.<sup>9</sup> In each section, we close by considering the complex relationship between these arguments about democracy, autocracy and international politics and an emergent realism. We find that the analytic lines were by no means drawn in hard-and-fast terms and that realists as well as liberals drew on arguments about the consequences of authoritarian rule. Moreover, we suggest how discussions of liberal theory in general and of the democratic peace in particular have a much more complex intellectual pedigree than is thought.

We also hope to make a contribution to method. In undertaking this exercise, we suggest how the history of international relations theory can cast a wider net, including legal scholars, policy analysts and public intellectuals coming out of quite diverse intellectual traditions. We also show how theoretical developments were responsive to real-world events. Just as theory responded to the rise of autocracy in the 1920s and 1930s, so we are seeing a revival of interest in the issue as authoritarian great powers re-emerge and democracy falters. In the conclusion we take up the wider implications of these earlier debates for liberal theory, including the democratic peace literature. We consider whether a simple authoritarian-democratic binary is an appropriate lens on these issues and take up the question of the variety of authoritarian rule. But we argue that these interwar conversations had profound influence not only on realist and liberal theorizing about IR but on American foreign policy and thus on the shape of the Cold War international order as well.

### **Setting the Stage: The Authoritarian Wave**

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. Ikenberry 2006

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt 1998, 2012; Wilson 1998; Thies 2002; Ashworth 2002, 2006; Quirk and Vigneswaran 2005; Osiander 2012. Bell 2014 looks back to a still-earlier set of antecedents in the late 19th century.

Lee offers a succinct characterization of the authoritarian wave in the interwar period.<sup>10</sup> The challenge to democracy came in two forms. The first were the diverse domestic developments that resulted in reversions to authoritarian rule. The overthrow of Russia's short-lived Provisional Government by the Bolsheviks in 1917—if it could be considered a democracy—represented one of the few authoritarian regime changes instigated by the left; revolutions in Germany, Spain and Hungary subsequently failed. Yet the new autocratic regimes were a diverse lot as well, ranging from Mussolini, to the ascent of Hitler in Germany, to a collection of more traditionally conservative autocracies in Hungary, Poland, Austria and the Balkans.

The second challenge to democratic rule took the form of outright conquest.<sup>11</sup> Between 1939 and 1941, seven dictatorships came under direct German or Italian rule (Poland, Lithuania, Albania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Latvia and Estonia) and seven democracies were dismantled: Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. These regimes were subsequently ruled by Nazi governors or by collaborationist governments such as the Vichy regime in France.

How was this resurgence of authoritarianism being read by academics, public intellectuals and policy analysts? Some of this work was monographic and devoted to particular countries, with the “big three” European dictatorships—the Soviet Union, Italy and Germany—as well as Japan attracting the most attention.<sup>12</sup> But the debate went well beyond the particular. Reflective observers like Calvin Hoover, Karl Loewenstein, Hans Kohn, George Orwell and E.H. Carr theorized the origins, political economy and international consequences of the new authoritarianism.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1935, we can find whole conferences devoted to the subject.<sup>14</sup>

The scope of these debates was wide. Among current preoccupations was the rise of mass society<sup>15</sup> and the way in which new “political religions”<sup>16</sup> sought the total domination of civil society.<sup>17</sup> An important strand of this new work—among both mainstream and Marxist scholars—was an interest in the social psychology of authoritarianism<sup>18</sup> and the debilitating effects of propaganda.<sup>19</sup> Others directly linked authoritarian rule and mobilization for “total war”<sup>20</sup> and noted the emergence of “garrison states.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of the 1930s, an incipient

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<sup>10</sup> Lee 2016, 1-4

<sup>11</sup> We make only passing reference to developments outside of Europe, but Japan's actions in Manchuria in 1931 and Italy's annexation of Ethiopia in 1936 were critical preludes.

<sup>12</sup> see for example Hoover 1931, Kohn 1935 on the Soviet Union; Lasswell and Sereno 1937, Cole 1938 on Italy; Stein 1938 on Japan and Neumann 1935, Thompson 1935, Brady 1937 on Germany

<sup>13</sup> Hoover 1934, 1936, Loewenstein 1935 a, b, Kohn 1935, Orwell 1938, Carr 1939b

<sup>14</sup> Ford 1935; Childs 1936, Ford 1939, Hayes 1940

<sup>15</sup> Ortega y Gasset 1930, Lederer 1940

<sup>16</sup> Voegelin 1938

<sup>17</sup> Borkenau 1940, Hayes 1940, Hilferding 1940, Neumann 1942

<sup>18</sup> Marcuse 1934, Neumann 1938, Fromm 1941, Pollock 1941

<sup>19</sup> Lasswell 1927, 1935, Childs 1936

<sup>20</sup> Junger 1930, Ludendorff 1935, Laski 1935

<sup>21</sup> Lasswell 1941

community of international relations scholars joined the fray, engaging in debates on the failure of Wilsonianism but also—as we will argue—grappling with the implications of the new authoritarianism.<sup>22</sup>

A review of this entire field is far beyond the scope of what we can do here; we can at best sample from this very rich menu. But the three conversations reported here highlight a striking intellectual development. From very diverse starting points, each of these conversations explored the challenges posed by authoritarian rule not only to international cooperation and peace but to democracy itself.

### **The Christian Realists Confront Authoritarian Rule**

We start with the Christian realists and the figure of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) in particular. This group exercised significant influence over the course of international relations theory,<sup>23</sup> influencing realists such as Morgenthau (1904-1980) and Kennan (1904-2005).<sup>24</sup> Dingli succinctly characterizes this Augustinian tradition as non-utopian, anti-perfectionist and skeptical.<sup>25</sup> In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), Niebuhr offered an extended critique of authoritarianism and a defense of democracy as a check on self-interested behavior, virtually his definition of the concept of sin.<sup>26</sup> Over the 1930s, however, Tillich, Niebuhr and others had already developed their analysis of the international consequences of autocratic rule. Because authoritarian systems dispensed with institutional and moral restraints on the individual leaders and oligarchies that sat atop them, they were more likely to become sources of inordinate demands on other states and thus a challenge to international order.

The preoccupations of the Christian realists with international politics grew out of the profound political and moral failure of World War I. They were initially influenced by economic interpretations of international conflict, including Marxist ones. However the first Christian voices to sound the alarm on the authoritarian turn in Europe were those most directly affected by it. The German theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) played an important bridging role in this regard, and was among the first in this circle to use the word “totalitarianism.”<sup>27</sup> In 1932, Tillich had published his powerful Ten Theses on the critical posture the German churches should take with respect to the demands of the Nazis. Protestant theologians in the US were acutely aware of these developments as activists such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), Karl Barth (1886-1968) and others sought ecumenical support for their religious resistance.<sup>28</sup>

But Tillich’s analysis of the international risks posed by authoritarian rule went far beyond his concern with the church and had a political-economic foundation. In an essay

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<sup>22</sup> Carr 1939a, Morgenthau 1939, 1945, Herz 1942

<sup>23</sup> Epp 1991; Loriaux 1992; Guilhot 2017, Ch. 2; Rengger 2017

<sup>24</sup> Morgenthau 1962; Thompson 2009

<sup>25</sup> Dingli 2020

<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr 1941, ch. 7

<sup>27</sup> Merkely 1975, 78 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr 1934

published in 1934 entitled “The Totalitarian State and the Claims of the Church,” Tillich traced democratic breakdown to a process he called “disintegration,” including class struggles that led portions of the middle class to seek protection of their privileges even at the cost of the integrity of democratic rule.<sup>29</sup> Tillich argued that “the constantly diminishing latitude for the development of capitalist dynamics forces every national group to intensify its own political and economic aspirations and thus aggravate political conflicts and economic crisis.”<sup>30</sup>

Niebuhr’s early thinking on these issues also had a strong political economy component and drew on Marxist themes. As early as the late 1920s, Niebuhr had already voiced his skepticism of progressive liberal conceits, and subsequently argued that the Versailles settlement bore some responsibility for the rise of Nazism.<sup>31</sup> *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) reflected a generational reaction to the progressive theology of the Social Gospel movement and the optimistic rationalism of liberals and others on the left. *Moral Man* explores one central theme: that while individuals might have the potential for moral transcendence, social collectives—from classes to nation states—do not. First, collectives are held together by coercion; second, they are motivated by the interests—and particularly the material interests—of those who dominate them rather than commitment to any overarching ideals.

At this juncture, regime type—democracy and authoritarianism—played little role in Niebuhr’s thinking. He even toyed with a kind of moral equivalence in which regimes of all types were capable of overreach. Democracies no less than autocracies are ultimately held together by force and democracies no less than autocracies will be motivated by opportunistic material interests. Niebuhr not only pillories the hypocrisy of American imperialism<sup>32</sup> but explicitly rejects the democratic peace argument that democracies are generally more pacific: “it is not true that only kings make war. The common members of any national community, while sentimentally desiring peace, nonetheless indulge impulses of envy, jealousy, pride, bigotry and greed which make for conflict between communities”.<sup>33</sup>

At some time between the summer of 1938 and the end of 1939, however, events drove Niebuhr to make two intellectual moves that are of significance for our purposes here; not coincidentally, the Munich crisis falls precisely in this time frame.<sup>34</sup> The first was a sharper formulation of his anti-pacifist stance; the second, a theologically-grounded analysis of authoritarian and democratic rule and their international implications.<sup>35</sup>

The lead essay in his 1940 collection *Christianity and Power Politics* was titled “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”; the book was published as the debate over intervention was reaching a crescendo. The theological grounding of these arguments rested on the inadequacy of

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 52

<sup>30</sup> Tillich 1934, 51

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr 1933, 451-3

<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr 1932, 221-227

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 161

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr 1938

<sup>35</sup> Merkley 1975, 129-139; Warren 1997, Ch. 5; Inboden 2014

the “law of love” as a guide to practical action in the world. “It is the thesis of these essays,” he wrote, “that modern liberal perfectionism actually distills moral perversity out of moral absolutes. It is unable to make significant distinctions between tyranny and freedom because it can find no democracy pure enough to deserve its devotion; and in any case it can find none which is not involved in conflict, in its effort to defend itself against tyranny.” Failure to identify the authoritarian challenge to the democracies was at the core of his damning indictment not only of the Christian pacifists, but of non-interventionism and isolationism more generally. In his view, they were “unable to distinguish between the peace of capitulation to tyranny and the peace of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>36</sup>

The onset of war clarified these issues, and allowed Niebuhr to focus on the underlying sources of the conflict between the democracies and their authoritarian adversaries in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944). The disabilities of authoritarian rule were traced through a consideration of anti-democratic theory, in which Niebuhr includes not only Hobbes but Luther.<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr’s more general critique of anti-democratic theory is its excessive pessimism: “human desires are regarded as inherently inordinate, and human character is believed to be practically devoid of inner checks upon expansive desires.”<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr concludes that only democracy can “guide, direct, deflect and rechannel conflicting and competing forces in a community in the interest of a higher order.”<sup>39</sup> This “higher order” is some principle of justice against which “the [necessary] strategies of coercion of the community are judged and prevented from becoming inordinate.”<sup>40</sup> Put most succinctly, democracy is a necessary condition for moral order itself, and not only at home but in the international arena as well. Authoritarian rule forecloses this possibility, not only dampening prospects for cooperation but increasing the possibility of outright conflict.

The second critique of authoritarian regimes is more familiar and centered on institutional design. In anti-democratic theory, the interests of the ruler or ruling oligarchy and the community are assumed to seamlessly converge; Niebuhr makes similar criticisms of Rousseau.<sup>41</sup> Authoritarian systems are guilty of “failing to provide checks against the inordinate impulses to power, to which all rulers are tempted.” In his critical analysis of how German authoritarianism arose and went awry, Niebuhr even offers up a qualified appreciation of Madison.<sup>42</sup> The absence of checks at home ultimately has consequences abroad. Just as the authoritarian regimes subordinate the individual to the collective at home, so they tend to identify the national community with universal moral principles. As a result, they make inordinate claims on other nations and ultimately resort to outright imperialism if they have the capacity to do so.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Niebuhr 1940, x

<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr 1944, 380-81; see also Niebuhr 1940, 51

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 380

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 380

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 392, 394

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 380-81

<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr 1940, 49-67, see esp. 59

<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr 1944, 442-443



The critique of authoritarianism can also be understood by focusing on how Niebuhr thought democracy operated to provide checks on self-interested behavior, which went beyond the institutional arguments just noted into the realm of norms. The “children of darkness” are those who know no law beyond their will and self-interest; they reflect the challenge of moral cynicism. The “children of light,” however, routinely underestimate how their own behavior is also motivated by self-interest.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the “children of light” accept the imperative of bringing self-interest under regulative political and social control. Democracy is conceptualized as an institutional design for doing just that. In a well-known dictum from the preface of the book, Niebuhr argues that “man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>45</sup> In the final chapter of *Children of Light, Children of Darkness* Niebuhr argues—explicitly contra Hobbes—that while “nations are more consistently egoistic than individuals...even the collective behavior of men stands under some inner moral checks; and the peace of the world requires that these checks be strengthened.”<sup>46</sup>

The fundamental challenge posed to the United States in the postwar period would be that facing any great power: that “we must seek to maintain a critical attitude toward our own power impulses; and our self-criticism must be informed by the humble realization of the fact that the possession of great power is a temptation to injustice for any nation.”<sup>47</sup> Following Madison, institutional design plays a key role in this regard. Democracy “arms the individual with political and constitutional power to resist the inordinate ambition of rulers, and to check the tendency of the community to achieve order at the price of liberty.”<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr extends these arguments to the international level. Despite his critique of both naive and more sophisticated versions of the Wilsonian project, Niebuhr argued for the importance of international constitutional checks on the great powers.<sup>49</sup> The major powers have an obligation to transcend their narrow interests, “embody plans for the organization of the world into their agreements,”<sup>50</sup> accommodate the interests of small as well as larger powers and thus reach for an international order which embodies a conception of justice.<sup>51</sup>

Niebuhr’s arguments are not just institutional however; he casts the question in a more expansive way that relates ultimately to values. Democratic countries “have a culture which demands self-criticism in principle and institutions which make it possible in practice.”<sup>52</sup> Only under a democracy can critical voices of conscience have the freedom to articulate an alternative to moral cynicism or to the overly-optimistic and ultimately naive thinking of the “children of light.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> for example Niebuhr 1944, 362

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 354

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 454

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 456

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 381

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 444-449

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 452

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 453-4

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 455

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 457

Authoritarian regimes, by contrast, lack these institutional and moral checks. Niebuhr predicted that “Russia will have the greatest difficulty in establishing inner moral checks on its will to power.”<sup>54</sup> From *Moral Man and Immoral Society* through *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr criticizes the Marxist failure to anticipate the rise of self-interested ruling groups that ultimately dominate the Soviet system, a point we take up below in our discussion of Hook.<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr attributes the difficulties the democracies will have in managing the Soviet Union in part to cultural and religious factors that pre-date Communist rule. He nonetheless concludes that “the tendency to self-righteousness is accentuated in Russia by the absence of democratic institutions through which, in other nations, sensitive minorities act as the conscience of the nation and subject its actions and pretensions to criticism.”<sup>56</sup> With remarkable prescience, Niebuhr argues that even an agreement between the powers to divide the world into spheres of influence would “would only mitigate mutual suspicion and only slightly delay ultimate conflict.”<sup>57</sup>

Niebuhr is often read as paving the way for a kind of realism in which the balancing of power is central and Waltz’s first and second images—those relating to psychology and domestic politics—are relegated to a secondary role.<sup>58</sup> But Niebuhr explicitly rejected that view.<sup>59</sup> It is clear that Niebuhr’s realism is ultimately grounded in his theological anthropology, which underlines the debilitating effects of self-interest and the corresponding risks of leaving power unchecked at the domestic level. Tillich, Niebuhr and other Christian realists underscored how authoritarian regimes provided few checks on the impulses of their leaders, with profound and adverse implications on the prospects for international order.

### **Scraps of Paper? Legal Scholars and Authoritarian Conceptions of International Law**

A parallel conversation among international lawyers converged around similar themes, particularly the consequences of authoritarian rule for the ability of states to maintain international legal commitments. By 1938, these scholars were in agreement that the absence of constraining institutions at the domestic level had international repercussions, weakening the force of international law and heightening the risk of outright conflict and war.

These legal debates have their ultimate origins in the aftermath of the Great War (1914-1918). The victorious powers attempted to deepen the scope of international legal commitments in order to prevent a recurrence of conflict. These efforts included not only the Treaty of Versailles, the founding of the League of Nations and the Locarno Treaties of 1925, but also the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 and the Washington and London Naval Treaties of 1922, 1930 and 1936. As part of the same general movement, American lawyers, jurists and political scientists also began to articulate new conceptions of international law that justified these

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 455

<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr 1944, 381, 387-8

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 455

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 453

<sup>58</sup> for example, Rich 1992

<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr 1944, 450-51

commitments and sought to make them more binding. These efforts all focused on what was often called the “problem of sovereignty.” The juristic theory of the state popular in the first decade of the twentieth century had set no limits on what a state might do in the pursuit of its goals. This theory not only ran afoul of a new empirical turn in the social sciences, but seemed increasingly anachronistic in the wake of the staggering losses of World War I.<sup>60</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the new authoritarian regimes saw the Wilsonian international order as little more than a victor’s justice, a view which had influential sympathizers in both the US and Britain.<sup>61</sup> But the challenge posed by the rise of authoritarian regimes went deeper. These governments not only rejected external constraints on their behavior; they also rejected the *domestic* legal constraints that were necessary for international commitments to be binding and credible. American legal scholars began to focus their attention on how authoritarian conceptions of law were completely incompatible not only with Wilsonian ambitions but with the very idea of international law as a constraint on state behavior. As we will show, realists were quick to identify this problem and criticize liberals for their “idealism.” Yet the problem that both legal scholars and emergent realists identified rested precisely on domestic political developments, namely, the rise of authoritarian regimes and the associated dismantling of constraining institutions.

This strand of thinking about the relationship between authoritarianism and international legal commitments can be framed by considering the well-known tension between the international legal principle of keeping commitments once made (*pacta sunt servanda*) and the recognition that treaties might be abrogated in whole or in part in the face of fundamentally changed circumstances (*rebus sic stantibus*). The principle of *rebus sic stantibus* was not widely disputed prior to 1920 and even Woodrow Wilson observed during the Versailles peace conference that a state might repudiate any treaty it wished to.<sup>62</sup>

However, this view was increasingly challenged over the 1930s by a more legalistic interpretation of interstate commitments. The leading proponent of this approach was the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen (1881-1973), who articulated a positivist legal theory that strictly separated law from morality.<sup>63</sup> According to Kelsen, law should not be seen as emanating from higher ethical principles, which could potentially be used to challenge it. Rather, law should be seen as having force because it was enacted by a legitimate authority and accepted as such. Kelsen saw international law as fundamentally of the same apolitical but nonetheless coercive character<sup>64</sup>, with states as a collection of actors equal under the law, existing within a hierarchy of norms.<sup>65</sup> A surprising result follows. The international legal order has no need of a sovereign for the law to be binding.

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<sup>60</sup> Schmidt 1998

<sup>61</sup> most notably Keynes 1920

<sup>62</sup> Miller 1969, 293

<sup>63</sup> Kelsen 1929

<sup>64</sup> Kelsen 1934, 108-109

<sup>65</sup> Kelsen 1920

Realists in the democracies were quick to point out the underlying political realities: as E.H Carr put it tersely, such law was little more than “a bulwark of the existing order.”<sup>66</sup> Hitler was more caustic, refusing to accept “that God has permitted some nation, first to acquire a world by force and then to defend this robbery with moralizing theories”.<sup>67</sup> Also not surprisingly, authoritarian states began to systematically repudiate what they saw as imposed legal commitments. For example, Japan and Germany both left the League in 1933, Germany repudiated Versailles and Locarno in 1936, and Italy followed Japan and Germany out of the League in 1937.

Yet the authoritarian challenge to international law should not be read simply as a vindication of *realpolitik*. The challenge was also rooted in authoritarian theories of the law at the domestic level. These arose, ironically, in response to the weakness of democratic regimes and of Weimar Germany in particular. The German jurist Carl Schmitt—who cast a long shadow over this debate—sounded an early note of skepticism about the idea of a self-supporting legal system. Schmitt argued that by making law primary and removing it from the sphere of morality, theorists like Kelsen and Hugo Krabbe had simply reified the status quo, giving cover to special interests engaged in state capture.<sup>68</sup> Opting instead for a natural law approach, Schmitt argued that no matter how extensive a code of laws might be, exceptions would nevertheless arise. He identified a state’s sovereign as the entity charged with determining both whether a “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*) has occurred and what ought to be done about it.<sup>69</sup> While law is thereby necessarily limited, the sovereign is unlimited, conceptually prior to the legal system, and unbound by it except insofar as it wishes to be. In short, in line with the juristic theory of the state, the sovereign is by definition unconstrained.

The authoritarian regimes of the interwar period were a heterogeneous lot, and they sought to ground the state’s authority in diverse ways. The American scholar of international law Lawrence Preuss, for example, identified two schools of legal naturalism in Germany.<sup>70</sup> One made the state the primary locus of morality; the other vested this role in the *Volk*. In parallel, observers of the Soviet Union noted an analogous elevation of the proletariat grounded in legal positivism.<sup>71</sup>

But the point drawn out by this cluster of legal scholars was that the effects of authoritarian law on international relations were nonetheless quite similar. By identifying a favored group as the source of moral value, any commitments that run against the interests of that group—the nation, the *Volk* or the proletariat—are by definition void. Because the state also decides what counts as in the interests of these political principals, legal theories following Schmitt effectively admitted little or no check on state action whatsoever.

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<sup>66</sup> Carr 1939, 190

<sup>67</sup> Hitler 1939

<sup>68</sup> Dyzenhaus 2015, 340

<sup>69</sup> Schmitt 1922, 12-15

<sup>70</sup> Preuss 1935

<sup>71</sup> Hoover 1931

The implications did not go unnoticed. Arthur Steiner observed that “upon the activity of the State, so conceived, there can be no limitation outside of itself; the State becomes totalitarian.”<sup>72</sup> Nor did authoritarians hide this fact. As fascist theorist Alfredo Rocco put it, “the Fascists differ fundamentally from the Liberals; the latter see in liberty a principle, the Fascists accept it as a method. By the Liberals, freedom is recognized in the interest of the citizens; the Fascists grant it in the interest of society.”<sup>73</sup> On this understanding, the idea of a constraint or a check on the state is self-evidently undesirable, because any such constraints would simply present an opportunity for self-interested individuals to pursue their own gain (“class self-defense”) at the expense of the collective. In addition to challenging the sanctity of law, authoritarian regimes similarly undermined the social foundations of the checks on governments that democracies provide.

These students of international and comparative law were quick to press home the wider implications for international order. As Hoover put it, the emphasis on sovereignty at all costs “quite naturally engenders a complex of legal conceptions in which contractual law is preferred to customary law, bilateral agreements to multilateral pacts, the sovereignty of the single state to its limitation by political international organization, arbitration and the like.”<sup>74</sup> Preuss noted that by emphasizing the “inalienable and illimitable character” of national prerogatives in the name of the favored group, the legal naturalists effectively denied the possibility of an objective international legal system altogether.<sup>75</sup> He continues by noting that “an individualistic system of so-called “fundamental” rights leaves the solution of conflicts to force whenever any state deems that its “self-defense” or “national honor” are endangered.”<sup>76</sup>

Preuss was not alone. The English theorist Harold Laski argued that if we assume, with Schmitt, that “the state has an absolute moral value beyond which we cannot go,” then “the validity of international law must necessarily consist in its furtherance of that value.”<sup>77</sup> Because only the sovereign can judge what the interests of the state are, a state need only look to its own interests when deciding whether or not to abide by a principle of international law. The American lawyer Philip Brown returned to the competing principles of *pacta sunt servanda* and *rebus sic stantibus* to make the point. While states had long relied on *rebus sic stantibus* to escape irksome international commitments, democracies were constrained by domestic groups with an interest in honoring international commitments.<sup>78</sup> Authoritarian regimes face no such constraint. As Brown observed succinctly, in authoritarian regimes, the exception (*rebus sic stantibus*) swallows the rule (*pacta sunt servanda*).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Steiner 1936, 275

<sup>73</sup> Rocco 1925, 387

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, 12

<sup>75</sup> Preuss 1935, 608

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 609

<sup>77</sup> Laski 1935, 220

<sup>78</sup> Brown 1938, 776

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

The New York lawyer and Republican congressman Frederic Coudert offered a concise summary of these reflections on authoritarianism and international law. “The existence of such [authoritarian] States, recognizing no moral limitation, no natural rights, no rights of minorities, and wholly intent upon their own aggrandizement, is incompatible with general peace and with international law. The nation that knows no law within its own boundaries, save the will of the ruler, cannot and will not, longer than necessity or interest dictates, observe rules of law founded upon mutual consent and based upon consideration for justice and the rights of other peoples”.<sup>80</sup>

Well before 1938, it had already become obvious that the totalitarian conception of international law made the Wilsonian facade increasingly brittle. But the fiasco of the Munich agreements at the end of September 1938 exerted a clarifying effect on the international law conversation.<sup>81</sup> As overt conflict loomed, it was a short step to the observation that pinning hopes on international law was not only fanciful but dangerous. Legal scholars began to argue that Kelsen’s positivist separation of law and morality and his banishment of the idea of sovereignty had inadvertently provided cover for authoritarian regimes to dismantle external constraints on their behavior.

It is worth noting by way of conclusion that an emergent realist thinking embraced this critique of international law, and it remains constitutive of that tradition to this day.<sup>82</sup> In one of his early writings after emigrating to the United States in 1937, Hans Morgenthau—a student of Kelsen’s—underlined the conflict between the interwar process of legalization and the collective security arrangements embodied in the League. By 1939, many small European states were reverting to a preference for neutrality rather than upholding their League-mandated obligation to oppose aggression by committing to sanctions.<sup>83</sup> The reasons for Morgenthau were clear: the changing realities of power and the weakness of the League failed to provide adequate defense for the small powers to stand on principle. International law could not sustain itself.

Morgenthau was not alone. By 1939, other critics began to focus on the limits to what Schmitt had called “legalization and depoliticization.”<sup>84</sup> The future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was a young legal counsel to the American delegation at Versailles in 1919. In his 1939 book, *War, Peace and Change*, Dulles argued that attempts to use a fleeting position of power to “lock in” a favorable international system for the future could only succeed if they were accompanied by the establishment of flexible mechanisms through which new conditions could be accommodated.<sup>85</sup> The English diplomat and historian Edward Hallett Carr, like Dulles a veteran of Versailles, reached similar conclusions. In *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, Carr argued that the interwar passion for legalization had placed international law at odds with the existing balance of power, and it was precisely this mismatch that gave the totalitarian regimes cover to

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<sup>80</sup> Coudert 1937, 175

<sup>81</sup> e.g. Hoden 1939

<sup>82</sup> e.g. Mearsheimer 1994

<sup>83</sup> Morgenthau 1939, 479

<sup>84</sup> Schmitt 1929

<sup>85</sup> Dulles 1939, 32

repudiate their international commitments.<sup>86</sup> Like Dulles, Carr thought that “[r]espect for law and treaties will be maintained only in so far as the law recognizes effective political machinery through which it can itself be modified and superseded.”<sup>87</sup> Echoing Schmitt, Carr argued that “there must be a clear recognition of that play of political forces which is antecedent to all law. Only when these forces are in stable equilibrium can the law perform its social function without becoming a tool in the hands of the defenders of the *status quo*. The achievement of this equilibrium is not a legal, but a political task”<sup>88</sup>

But the source of the disequilibrium that Morgenthau, Dulles and Carr identify is to be found at least in part in the collapse of democracy and the emergence of authoritarian rule. Morgenthau notes that “the moral and political philosophy which has been the foundation of international law from its very beginning is no longer recognized by all great nations.”<sup>89</sup> Yet Morgenthau is clear at the outset of his analysis that it was precisely the crisis around how to respond to Italian derogations in 1936 that initiated this unraveling. Thus while the realists rightly looked to changes in the distribution of power to understand these developments, it is clearly the rising authoritarian regimes—not the democracies—that had made collective security untenable.

It is far beyond the scope of this paper to resolve the historical responsibility that Wilsonianism bears for the prolonged crisis of the 1930s, including the rise of authoritarianism itself. But it is not implausible to invert the causal arrows of the early realists and to find the unraveling of the interwar order in the authoritarian turn. Morgenthau is explicit in stating that the hitherto-restricted scope of *rebus sic stantibus* had depended on the existence of an “international morality” that was offended by abrogating international commitments. He is also explicit—as we have noted—that these principles were no longer shared, and by the authoritarian states in particular. Carr—redolent of Niebuhr—notes that the loss of democratic constraints and the consequent neutralization of civil society prevented the moral constraints from operating. Yet these arguments are little different than the wider liberal claim that regime type mattered. Authoritarian rule not only removed institutional and normative checks at home but decreased the prospects for international cooperation and increased the risks of conflict.

### **Dissecting the Soviet Case: The Debate on the Left**

In Lenin’s final years, and particularly following his death in 1924, the American left engaged in a sustained internecine debate over the Soviet Union. These debates have to our knowledge not been tapped as relevant to the history of international relations theory, but they proved surprisingly consequential for postwar liberalism and Cold War thinking. The debates moved along two parallel but related tracks. One centered on whether the Soviet Union was deserving of continued support, censure, or even more active and direct confrontation. The second debate, however, centered on the nature of the Soviet political system and what had gone

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<sup>86</sup> Carr 1939a

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.* 192

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Morgenthau 1939, 483

wrong under Stalin. We will show that these debates were ultimately joined, and that the authoritarian nature of the political system was ultimately linked with the country's international conduct.

The debate divided into competing camps. Liberals such as John Dewey never had a sustained interest in Marxism in the first place and by 1934 infatuation with the Soviet experiment was fading in that camp. Among those in the Communist Popular Front group, by contrast, support for the Soviet Union persisted through the show trials and the Hitler-Stalin pact, revived during the war and was even sustained into the postwar period.

A third group of intellectuals began the 1930s with a strong commitment to Marxism but ultimately became staunch anti-Communists. Sidney Hook—prolific, polemical and widely-studied—provides an important entry point. Hook was trained as a philosopher under Dewey, wrote two of the most significant treatments of Marxist theory in the United States up to that time and ultimately addressed the role of democracy in Marxist theory. Hook and other left intellectuals drew in part on Trotsky's critique of Stalin, but pushed the critique to its logical conclusion. The suppression of democracy within the party as well as broader society had a number of consequences for Soviet foreign policy. Initially, Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country" and the belated response to the rise of fascism were seen as opportunistic. Yet over time, the strands of debate on foreign policy and regime type got joined in a very different way. Totalitarian regimes were not only intent on suppressing dissenting voices at home, but had an active interest in muddying rational discourse, sewing disinformation and undermining democratic rule abroad. The implications for international order were self-evident, and required active resistance. Generally neglected as a source of foreign policy thinking in the literature on IR theory, these disaffected Marxists in fact had an abiding effect on Cold War thinking about international order.

Hook's 1987 autobiography, *Out of Step*, is an unreliable guide to his political views in the 1920s and 1930s; although self-critical, it also shades his radicalism and commitment to revolutionary Marxism. Nonetheless, it also outlines well the intellectual milieu in which these debates took place. *Out of Step* underscores that the left—but not only the left—saw the causes of World War I in the contradictions of advanced industrial capitalism. A second and more complex set of considerations about the role of the Soviet Union in international politics followed. Virtually by definition, the Soviet Union—as a socialist country—could not be an imperialist power in the traditional sense. Fascist states would ultimately seek to crush the experiment if they could; outside intervention in the civil war had proven the point. Rather, the Soviet Union had to be defended because it was the only extant socialist system.

As the center of world revolution, the Soviet Union was important for those on the left for a further *realpolitik* reason: that it had a crucial responsibility to check the rise of the fascist powers. As Hook put it in *Out of Step*, "since a victory by Hitler spelled, according to our own program of action, war against the Soviet Union, I assumed that the Kremlin in its own interests and that of the international working class... would organize a revolution through its powerful



Communist political and trade union affiliates in Germany.”<sup>90</sup> This hope was quickly exploded by events.

The ascent of Stalin and his articulation of the theory of “socialism in one country” took Soviet foreign policy in a completely different direction. The Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 outlined the onset of the “third period” during which capitalism was entering a terminal crisis. This approach was rooted in an assessment of the balance of political forces in Western Europe and in Germany in particular, and took a harsh stance with respect to democratic coalition-building. Social democracy was portrayed as little more than an ally of the fascist movement: “social fascists” in the Comintern’s colorful language. Cooperation among the political forces on the left was thus not only unnecessary but counterproductive; in the infamous phrase of the German Communist Party, “After Hitler, us!” It was not until the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935 that Stalin belatedly acknowledged the necessity of forming “popular fronts” that would of necessity tolerate diverse political forces in the name of the anti-fascist fight.

The question for the dissident Marxist left during the mid-1930s—those who had drifted away from the Communist Party—was why the Soviet Union had become so quiescent and opportunistic. Leon Trotsky played a seminal, even charismatic, role in providing an answer, and it centered on internal decision-making processes in the Soviet Union and the political economy of the state apparatus. Dating from the struggle for power following the death of Lenin, through his exile in 1929 and culminating in the publication of *The Revolution Betrayed* in 1937, Trotsky formulated a theory of the Soviet system that exercised tremendous sway over significant segments of the American left.<sup>91</sup> Stripped of nuance, Trotsky argued that the expropriation of private property and entry onto a transitional path toward socialism defined the Soviet Union as economically progressive and thus worthy of defense. Yet Trotsky simultaneously railed against political developments in the country. He was not concerned with the early Bolshevik departures from more open democratic rule. Rather he focused on what he called “bureaucratism,” which he believed was the defining feature of Stalinism. The administrative strata were not only self-interested but had systematically stifled inter-party democracy—at least among the leadership—that was necessary to assure progress towards socialist objectives.<sup>92</sup>

Trotsky saw these domestic developments as leading the Soviet Union away from its revolutionary roots and obligations. In his 1934 primer on international relations, Trotsky provided a half-hearted defense of Stalin’s embrace of Wilsonian principles. A nominal commitment to disarmament and the rejection of aggression were tactical necessities brought on by capitalist encirclement. For the truly revolutionary, however—namely the communist movements grouped under the banner of Trotsky’s Fourth International—Wilsonian ideals should not be elevated to general principle. Moreover, the sources of international conflict should not be diagnosed in liberal terms. “A modern war between the great powers does not signify a conflict between democracy and fascism but a struggle of two imperialisms for the redivision of

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<sup>90</sup> Hook 1987, 176

<sup>91</sup> see in particular Wald 1987

<sup>92</sup> Trotsky 1937; Service 2009, 455-464

the world.” Trotsky favored a more internationalist Soviet Union committed to revolution abroad. He was surprisingly prescient in foreseeing Stalin’s opportunism and the fact that “an alliance of the USSR with an imperialist state or with one imperialist combination against another, in case of war, cannot at all be considered as excluded”.<sup>93</sup>

Hook was largely in agreement with Trotsky’s analysis, but pushed the argument much farther than Trotsky was willing to go. In 1933, he published a sophisticated analysis of the rise of fascism that went beyond Communist Party platitudes and rejected the Comintern’s failed diagnosis of the German question. The tenuous ties he had with the party were sundered.<sup>94</sup> Around the same time, he also started to push the critique of Soviet authoritarianism in a much sharper direction.<sup>95</sup> At this stage, Hook remained committed to a conception of democracy which was Marxist and at best agnostic toward democratic institutions traditionally conceived. Hook’s conception of workers’ democracy owed a significant debt to syndicalism, seeing democracy in the workplace as the foundation for elected workers councils. In his contribution to the debates gathered in *The Meaning of Marx*, Hook argued that “the political democracy of the bourgeoisie [still] meant the social dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>96</sup> Hook placed emphasis on the importance of persuasion vis-a-vis “intermediate classes,” but was clear that a workers’ democracy would be exclusionary: it would not permit “a democracy for bankers, capitalists and their supporters who would bring back a state of affairs which would make genuine social democracy impossible”.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, he argued that the rise of fascism proved that “not all matters can be settled by free discussion”<sup>98</sup> and that “Communism is most likely the outcome of a revolutionary process, albeit ideally a majority not minority one.”<sup>99</sup>

But Hook went to great lengths to distinguish a “workers’ democracy”—the term he preferred to the dictatorship of the proletariat—from what he identified as the “dictatorship *over* the proletariat.” He was highly critical of a hierarchical political party in which “the responsible posts in the press, schools and government are filled only by party members, that no non-party workers are elected to the councils except those approved or declared safe by the party, and that all militant workers who express their disapproval of the line of the party find their way to concentration camps or worse”.<sup>100</sup> In “The Democratic and Dictatorial Aspects of Communism” he provided a granular inventory of how the Soviet Union had deviated from Communist ideals: the assessment of economic planning and performance was vested in an unelected Party organ rather than in bodies that workers controlled; voting was not free because ballots were not secret, and in any case the Party controlled all nominations; the judiciary was completely controlled by the Party.<sup>101</sup> As Trotsky also had complained, administration had overtaken governance.

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<sup>93</sup> Trotsky 1934, para. 43

<sup>94</sup> Phelps 1977, 77

<sup>95</sup> Hook 1934a, b, c

<sup>96</sup> Hook 1934b, 47-48

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, 49

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 106

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 66-67

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, 50

<sup>101</sup> Hook 1934c

What was it precisely about Soviet authoritarianism that Hook found so troubling? The critique returned Hook to his pragmatist—and ultimately Deweyan—roots. A dictatorship over the proletariat would stifle the fullest freedom of discussion and criticism. For Hook, such discussion and criticism was not only necessary to check incumbents in the usual political sense; rather, freedom of expression went to the very institutional foundations of scientific inquiry. Hook repeatedly called into question Marxism’s pretension to be a science and the belief that it had discovered deterministic laws of history; heated exchanges with Trotsky hammered on this quasi-religious conceit.<sup>102</sup> Rational human action required experimentation and learning from facts. Increasingly Hook was coming to the view that achieving these objectives rested on a particular—and ultimately liberal democratic—institutional foundation.

As noted above, the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935 belatedly acknowledged the necessity for a “Popular Front” against fascism that would not only unify the left but draw in liberal parties as well. Coalitions in France under Blum and cooperation between communists, anarchists and Republicans in Spain suggested a new approach to resisting fascism. In 1936, Hitler took his first significant foray against the Versailles and Locarno settlements by remilitarizing the Rhineland. The announcement of the Popular Front and the urgency of the international situation extended the legitimacy of “fellow traveling” with the Communist Party.

However the Soviet show trials that started in 1936 were but the first in a succession of revelations about the Soviet Union that further divided the left and generated a more militant anti-Stalinism that would persist and deepen into the Cold War era.<sup>103</sup> The absurdity of the trials, the sycophancy with which the defendants responded (later memorialized in Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*) and increasing awareness of the extent of the purges had a powerful effect on the left. Philip Rahv’s 1938 sweeping indictment in the *Partisan Review*, “Trials of the Mind”, ends with a pox-on-both-their-houses defense of non-interventionism.<sup>104</sup> But Rahv took aim not only at the Soviet system—the threat of which he put on a par with fascism—but at the complicity of American intellectuals as well.

By this point in time, Rahv and Hook were not alone. The American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky provided an initial focal point for these defectors. The Committee drew together liberals such as Dewey as well as those on the left who joined the path beaten by Hook. As Westerbrook puts it in his intellectual biography of Dewey, “the membership list [of the Committee] was a virtual roster of the American anti-Stalinist left”.<sup>105</sup>

Hook’s detailed assessment of the show trials,<sup>106</sup> the heated debate over means, ends and socialist ethics, including with Trotsky himself,<sup>107</sup> and further reflections on Trotsky’s analysis of

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<sup>102</sup> Hook 1933, 1934a and summarized fully in Hook 1940

<sup>103</sup> Wald 1987, ch. 5

<sup>104</sup> Rahv 1938

<sup>105</sup> Westerbrook 1991, 481

<sup>106</sup> Hook 1937

<sup>107</sup> Phelps 1997, 171-179

the Russian revolution<sup>108</sup> were shifting Hook's thinking in an entirely new direction: that the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships should both be seen as "totalitarian" regimes. How, Hook asked in "Liberalism and the Case of Leon Trotsky," can American liberals who are concerned about fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain be indifferent to events in Russia?<sup>109</sup> Hook increasingly came to the conclusion that the basic premises of the Marxist theory of the state were fundamentally flawed: that the state was simply an instrument of a dominant economic class; that a political system totally dominated by the party-state can be considered a workers' democracy; and that residual coercive powers would ultimately wither away. Inverting Marxist logic, the derogations of the Soviet system must be squarely located in "Russian state power." Hook also concluded that authoritarian rule was hardly a recent phenomenon made visible by the show trials or even by the rise of Stalin. Rather the political choice against democracy could be traced to the very inception of the Bolshevik party and its seizure and use of power.<sup>110</sup> Hook concludes his review of Trotsky by stating unambiguously that "no set of economic arrangements from which democratic control is absent, can ever achieve the moral and material promise of the socialist ideal."<sup>111</sup>

What were the implications of these controversies for thinking about foreign policy? In the period between the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and Operation Barbarossa (August 1939-June 1941) and again in the early postwar years, critics of the Soviet Union focused on its opportunism and expansionist behavior. Even prior to August 1939, however, Hook and other critics of the Soviet Union increasingly focused on Moscow's efforts to silence debate not only at home but abroad. The political culmination of these arguments was the founding of the Committee for Cultural Freedom in May 1939. Totalitarianism was now conceived as an ideology and political form that these regimes sought to advance. The Manifesto of the Committee published in 1939 charges that "through subsidized propaganda, through energetic agents, through political pressure, the totalitarian states succeed in infecting other countries with their false doctrines, in intimidating independent artists and scholars, and in spreading panic among intellectuals."<sup>112</sup> The threats were not just, or even primarily, military but rather political. The very existence of democracy posed a risk to authoritarian rule, a threat it sought to meet by controlling buffer states outright and by undermining the integrity of democratic rule where it could.

We have traced a somewhat circuitous evolution in Hook's thinking about the Soviet Union that had wider resonance among other disaffected leftists. Two lines of debate—one on foreign policy, the other around a diagnosis of the Soviet political system—were ultimately joined. Trotsky<sup>113</sup> and Hook<sup>114</sup> both cataloged examples of Stalin's international opportunism and Trotsky even anticipated the alliance with Hitler. Yet Hook's interpretation increasingly diverged

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<sup>108</sup> Hook 1939

<sup>109</sup> Hook 1937

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, 450

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, 462

<sup>112</sup> Hook 1939b

<sup>113</sup> Trotsky 1934

<sup>114</sup> Hook 1987

from Trotsky's as he saw the great international binary not in Marxist class terms but as rooted in fundamental differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes. As he notes almost in passing in his conclusion to *Reason, Social Myths and Democracy*, Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini were "enemies of democracy," not only at home but on the global stage.<sup>115</sup> Just as Stalin sought to eliminate any checks on his power at home, so totalitarian regimes similarly sought to use transnational allies and propaganda to silence critical voices abroad. Again, the implications for international order were obvious; an authoritarian great power such as the Soviet Union was a direct threat to the democracies and had to be met with firm policies of deterrence and even containment.

In closing, it is again worth noting some important nuances this story line introduces into our understanding of the origins of postwar realism, the nature of liberal theory, and the first "great debate." The ideas about the domestic sources of Soviet conduct were by no means confined to the likes of Hook. They can be found in core writings by Kennan in particular. In his famous Long Telegram of February 1946, Kennan sought to outline the sources of Soviet behavior. Strikingly, Kennan completely rejects the argument that they can be found at the level of the international system: "...the Soviet party line is not based on any objective analysis of the situation beyond Russia's borders...it arises mainly out of inner Russian necessities."<sup>116</sup> Similarly, his famous X article in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947, entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conflict" makes clear in its very first paragraph that those sources are to be found in the domestic arena.<sup>117</sup> Kennan's model of Soviet behavior is complex and has a long-historical component. But as with Hook, authoritarianism plays a central role. He argues that it is not Russia's external environment that is threatening. Rather, propaganda advances threatening images of the outside world to provide "justification for that increase of military and police power in Russia state [sic]."<sup>118</sup>

These domestic concerns nonetheless influence foreign policy. In a 1954 symposium on totalitarianism, Kennan noted that "real security for them lies only in the elimination of all surrounding freedom, for the knowledge of another way of life would unsettle the Russian people more than any other single factor. Hence, I think, the expansive tendency is built into the system."<sup>119</sup> Just as the Soviet leadership sought to extend its power domestically, so it used the political tools outlined by Hook to limit political, ideological and social challenges from abroad and to sew division and ultimately undermine democratic rule where it could.

## **Conclusion: The Authoritarian Challenge**

This essay has sought to reconstruct several overlapping conversations about the relationship between authoritarianism, foreign policy and international order. In this conclusion, we touch on how the findings can enrich current debates in IR theory and with respect to the

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<sup>115</sup> Hook 1940

<sup>116</sup> Kennan 1946, 549

<sup>117</sup> Kennan 1947

<sup>118</sup> Kennan 1946, 551

<sup>119</sup> Kennan 1954:35

democratic peace in particular. Those debates are once again focusing on the consequences of authoritarian great powers, backsliding and outright regress to authoritarian rule.<sup>120</sup> We comment briefly on the varieties of authoritarian rule as an important research agenda and how it may point to some disabilities in the authoritarian focus we have described. We close on some future directions for the study of the history of international relations theory.

Liberal international relations theory has long focused on a troika of causal factors: economic interdependence; international institutions, law and underlying norms; and democratic rule.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the democratic peace literature, however, the emphasis in the interwar debate was less on why democracies may be pacific—at least with one another—than on the challenges authoritarian regimes posed. This anatomy of authoritarianism and its international consequences was not limited to particular cases. Rather, it sought theoretical generality and suggested an expansive menu of how authoritarian rule might be connected with foreign policy behavior and international order. These arguments ranged from standard institutional ones to more expansive formulations about the rule of law, normative order, disinformation and even the assault on truth. As a result, these debates have a continuing relevance to liberal international theory.

Niebuhr appears closest to standard institutional constraint arguments that have been central to the democratic peace. His critique of non-liberal theorists such as Hobbes and Luther ridicules the idea that the interests of those rulers and publics will naturally align. He suggests—as several contemporary theorists do<sup>122</sup>—that authoritarian regimes face greater risk of adverse selection: the emergence of leaders whose personal interests in international conflict do not align with the interests of the publics they claim to represent. However, Niebuhr's causal story is not just about formal institutions but about broader normative and moral counterweights on the exercise of power. While Niebuhr no doubt is an important progenitor of postwar realism, he at the same time was acutely aware of the domestic political sources of international conduct and even of the role that normative order at home has on foreign policy and the prospects for international cooperation or conflict.

The legal conversation is a quite obvious precursor to the strand of the democratic peace literature that focuses on the credibility of commitments.<sup>123</sup> It is an unavoidable feature of the Westphalian system that states can abrogate international commitments at any time; that fact was well recognized by those seeking greater international legalization. What struck the comparative and international legal scholars we review here was not the authoritarian embrace of the *rebus sic stantibus* exception, but how it was ultimately grounded in a parallel conception, *pace* Schmitt, of domestic law. The relevance of this literature to a world populated by authoritarian regimes could not be more clear. Can China, Russia and other autocratic countries be drawn into international regimes in a productive way or are there intrinsic limits on their capacity to cooperate?

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<sup>120</sup> For example, Kroenig 2020

<sup>121</sup> Russett 1993

<sup>122</sup> e.g. Chiozza and Goemans 2011

<sup>123</sup> Lipson 2003.

Like Niebuhr, Hook traversed a crooked path from a Marxist theory of international conflict to one rooted more squarely in the effects of authoritarian rule. Hook harbored doubts about the Soviet political system even before Stalin's excesses were on full display. Lingered political commitments, bias, and strategic calculations of the value of keeping the Soviet Union onside hung over conversations on the left about the Soviet Union into the late 1930s. But Hook was not alone, and others on the left also came to see Stalinism not only as a contingent historical detour, but a failure rooted in the Marxist analysis of politics more generally. Like Niebuhr, Hook initially saw Soviet foreign policy as unprincipled, and opportunistic as a result. But he increasingly focused on the way in which authoritarian regimes had an interest in extending their reach. Again, the links to the current debates about authoritarian misinformation and the epistemological foundations of international order are clear.

A second concluding remark centers on the relatively broad brush with which the theorists we have analyzed here painted "authoritarian" regimes and what this body of work might have gotten wrong. To be sure, experts on particular countries were attuned to the nuances of different types of autocratic rule. Many of the new authoritarian regimes in Europe were quite traditional and did not have the totalizing ambitions of Stalin or Hitler, nor their disruptive power.<sup>124</sup> Italy, Spain, Germany and the Soviet Union obviously exhibited quite critical differences. It is therefore important to emphasize a point made by political scientists such as Peceny and Weeks among others.<sup>125</sup> Not all authoritarian regimes pose equal risks and differences in behavior might well be traced to the varieties of authoritarian rule. In this regard, the rise in the postwar period of a focus on "totalitarian" regimes may have been ill conceived in important respects. Could we really think of Nazi Germany and the postwar Soviet Union as similar regimes? The agenda we have outlined here could clearly benefit from appropriate nuance about how authoritarian regimes vary and with what effect.

We turn in concluding to some implications of our analysis for the study of the history of IR theory. While scholarly attention has been heaped on Carr, Morgenthau, Kennan and other early realists, a body of revisionist work has come to cast doubt on whether the so-called "first great debate" even took place.<sup>126</sup> We side strongly with these doubts; the theorists we consider here were anything but "idealists." But we also believe that characterizations such as those of a "first great debate" may hinge in part on how underlying source material is selected. Historians of IR should expand their palette and consider a wider array of scholars, intellectuals and policy analysts when excavating the intellectual lineages of IR theory and of its liberal variants in particular.

The story we trace here continued into the war. As John Ikenberry shows in *After Victory*, liberal voices in the postwar planning process were preoccupied with the question of regime type, and those concerns fed into debates over how to deal with Stalin in Eastern Europe.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Linz 1975:159 et seq.

<sup>125</sup> Peceny et. al. 2002, Peceny and Butler 2004; Weeks 2012, 2014

<sup>126</sup> Kahler 1997; Schmidt 1998, 2012; Wilson 1998; Thies 2002; Ashworth 2002, 2006; Quirk and Vigneswaran 2005; Osiander 2012; Guilhot 2017

<sup>127</sup> Ikenberry 2001

Thinking about the foundations of authoritarian rule not only played a crucial role in the period we examine here, but resurfaced with a vengeance and shaped the intellectual milieu in which postwar thinking about international politics began to gel. Major postwar works on totalitarianism, including not only Arendt, but writers as diverse as Hayek, Orwell, Camus, Milosz, and Friedrich and Brzezinski all highlighted the dangers posed by totalitarian rule both at home and abroad.<sup>128</sup> For good or ill, this body of work—deeply critical of authoritarian political systems—colored elite and public views of the Soviet Union and thus had an influence on Cold War thinking. This postwar history takes us far beyond what we have sought to reconstruct here, but its interwar roots constitute an important component of the history of liberal thinking about international relations that remains to be told in full.

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<sup>128</sup> Arendt 1951, Hayek 1944, Orwell 1949, Camus 1951, Milosz 1953, Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956



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