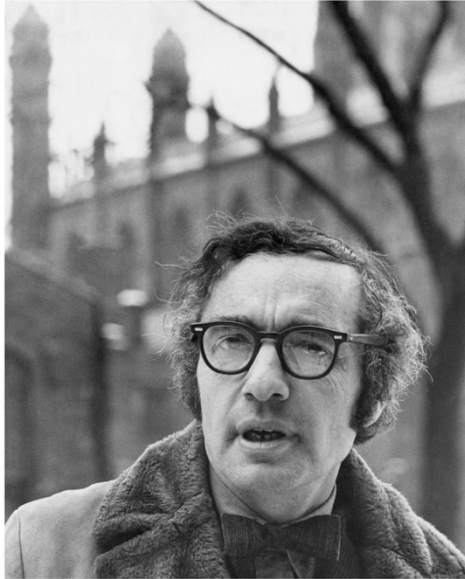


Totalitarianism Can Be Terrifying. It Can Also Be Thrilling. He Taught Us Why.

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Robert Jay Lifton. Charles Moore Estate, via Steven Kasher Gallery, New York



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Grappling with the 20th-century inventions of totalitarianism, genocide and mass atrocities, and nuclear arms, great political and legal thinkers strove to define these phenomena and describe their mechanisms. Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who died last Thursday at age 99, had a different goal. He aimed to understand what these institutions *felt* like — and what the people on both sides of great tragedies, the victims and the perpetrators, thought and experienced.

He understood totalitarianism not only as a system of domination but also as a source of comfort. He wrote about soldiers and others who committed atrocities not as two-dimensional monsters but as people moved by emotions — emotions for which one could have empathy. A [collection of articles](#) Lifton coedited, on the aftermath of Eastern European Communism, may have been the first study to frame the effects of totalitarianism as trauma — and it taught me that one can describe and study phenomena that the people affected by them have barely begun to understand.

Lifton spent some 75 years doing just that. The concepts he introduced in the roughly two dozen books he wrote or edited — and which he expanded on over the course of two days I spent [interviewing him](#) in 2023 — have shaped much of my own understanding of the things I write and think about: autocracy, war crimes, trauma and even my own family.

In 1954, when he was 28, he was living in Hong Kong after two years as an Air Force psychiatrist. Due to return to New York for his residency, which had been delayed by his military service, Lifton instead started interviewing people who had been interned by China. He did not know where this work would lead, nor did he know how he could fund it.

“I came back after a long walk through Hong Kong,” he told me, “and said, ‘Look, we just can’t stay. I don’t see any way we can.’” A day later, though, he decided to find a research grant that would allow him to stay. By his side was his wife, B.J. Lifton. She would go on to publish children’s books and become a prominent advocate of open adoption (she was adopted herself), but it was the 1950s, so she also helped type up her husband’s grant applications.

The [resulting book](#), published in 1961, examined what Lifton called totalism — a worldview both shaped and delimited by a single ideology. Unlike political theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who were studying totalitarianism as a form of government, Lifton was looking at people and the ways they can create or find totalism anywhere: in a country, yes, but also in a community or an institution — a religious organization, a school, a terrorist cell.

Whatever the scale, totalism offers “fixity and definiteness and absoluteness,” Lifton said — qualities that humans seek, sometimes desperately. In times of dislocation, whether physical or psychic, we are particularly vulnerable to the call of totalism, which promises not only an unassailable theory of everything but also something to do. Totalism, he observed, is mobilizing: It propels participants toward acting in the name of their ideology. Decades later, he saw Trumpism as a totalist movement that promised to envelop its participants in a secure, closed universe of lies.

Another of Lifton’s key concepts — malignant normality — is the psychological counterpart to an idea for which Arendt is remembered (and misremembered): “the banality of evil.” When Arendt coined the term in 1963 in her writing about the trial of the Nazi functionary Adolf Eichmann, she was widely accused of minimizing Nazi atrocities. She did nothing of the sort, of course. She was arguing against the notion that an author of the Final Solution was a larger-than-life monster: He was an otherwise ordinary, unremarkable man. Arendt was appalled that Eichmann, far from being a fervent ideologue and a fanatical antisemite, was a man who simply couldn’t be bothered with thinking, with questioning anything he was told.

Lifton described a key psychological mechanism, what he called the “thought-terminating cliché.” It’s the switch that mutes any idea that may contradict the totalist ideology. In Trumpism, Lifton believed, the Big Lie — the fiction that Trump won the 2020 election — served that function.

In his 1986 book “The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide,” he set out to understand how people trained as healers could become killers. His conclusion was that they did it by “doubling” — dividing the self into two separate, functional halves. The Nazi doctor’s “Auschwitz self” justified the killing and thereby allowed him to survive in the concentration camp environment; the doctor’s previous self allowed him to continue thinking of himself as a good person. As for the doctor’s conscience, that was displaced onto the Auschwitz self, allowing the doctor not to feel conflicted.

Lifton wrote that doubling was likely at work in any criminal organization, such as the Mafia, where a member might see himself as a good person because he is loyal and disciplined and a good family man, while his “killing self” guarantees his survival. Just four decades after the end of World War II, the project of understanding the psychology of Nazi criminals was unfamiliar enough to be startling. So was the fact that it was undertaken by a Jew, albeit one who professed extreme distaste for all organized religion.

“Doubling” has helped me understand something about the people carrying out the genocide in Gaza. “Angry grief” has helped me understand those who defend it. Lifton used this term when he carried out research on the 1968 My Lai massacre in South Vietnam, in which American soldiers killed as many as 500 unarmed civilians in the course of one morning, in one hamlet. A short while earlier, a beloved older sergeant from the American unit had been killed by a booby trap. The company commander, Lifton learned, had then told the soldiers, “There are no innocent civilians in this area.” Angry grief, combined with military policy, fueled the indiscriminate killing that ensued.

That combination of policy and emotion, or policy and ideology, is what Lifton called an “atrocious-producing situation.” When I think of my family in Israel, which includes a young cousin who has served as a unit commander in Gaza, and his mother, who has assured me that he is a good boy who has risked his life for his soldiers, I think of doubling and angry grief and atrocious-producing situations. It helps me understand, and it terrifies me.

Back in those early days in Hong Kong, Lifton came to think of himself as a “psychiatrist in the world.” A decade later, when he undertook a study of the aftermath of America’s nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, he started identifying as a “witnessing professional.” In his 80s, he published a memoir titled “Witness to an Extreme Century.”

Lifton's book about Hiroshima, "Death in Life," won a National Book Award in 1969. It made him widely known and made him an ever more effective public activist for abolishing nuclear weapons. At the same time, Lifton felt cast out of the psychoanalytic community. Psychoanalysts aren't supposed to be people in the world; their work is supposed to focus on the patient's inner world and family history as though these existed and developed in a vacuum. In his 90s, Lifton experienced a rapprochement with his profession. He was invited to speak at conferences and contribute articles. He seemed to find this development gratifying, though he was too reserved to claim that he had been ahead of his time.

For the last several years of his life, Lifton lived in North Truro, Mass., in a house that belonged to his partner, the political theorist Nancy Rosenblum. Their relationship began a few years after the death of B.J., to whom Lifton was married for 58 years. It hadn't been difficult to get used to a new setting, he told me. "The view helps." A giant living-room window looked out onto an expanse of sand, water and sky. Every morning before getting to work, Lifton looked out and took stock of the visible world: "Is it sunny or cloudy? What boats are visible?"

He relished talking about how much his life had changed. Rosenblum, who was two decades younger, had taught him things about emotional closeness and had helped improve his relationship with his children and grandchildren. He worried that taking care of him took time away from her own work, and I suspected that this sort of concern was something new for him, too. He seemed to be exhibiting, to the very end, a quality he had named proteanism — the sometimes astounding human capacity for change.

It was proteanism that gave Lifton, who spent his life studying atrocities and catastrophes, a fundamentally hopeful outlook. For all our longing for fixity and absolutes, which makes us vulnerable to the allure of totalism, we are also able to reinvent ourselves, as people and as communities. In his 2017 book, "The Climate Swerve," Lifton observed the emergence of what he called a species mentality — a movement toward solidarity that could save humanity. His next book, "Surviving Our Catastrophes," published when he was 97, linked the nuclear, climate-change and Covid-19 threats. We could and, he thought, would overcome catastrophe — by thinking and acting as a species. I fear that he was wrong, for once. I hope that he was right, as always.

M. Gessen is an Opinion columnist for The Times. They won a George Polk Award for opinion writing in 2024. They are the author of 11 books, including "The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia," which won the National Book Award in 2017.

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