As the historian and political scientist Walter Laqueur noted in the mid-1980s “no idea in our times provoked more passionate discussions than the idea of totalitarianism”. With his remark Laqueur drew attention mainly to the double structure of the term ‘totalitarianism’ which is full of tension: On the one hand the term represents a scientific theory, on the other hand, it’s a political and ideological term with conflicting connotations. In this sense it was used as a political weapon especially during the Second World War and the Cold War. The decline and fall of Communism in Europe has set up the requirements for a new approach to the concept of totalitarianism. Today, there is the chance to “historicize” the political instrumentalization of this model, that is, to evaluate it from historic distance and to make use of its explanatory competence in a new and less emotional way. Researchers still aim to refine the different approaches on totalitarianism in order to correct deficiencies and to draft alternative concepts. Yet, there is no agreement regarding the models of interpretation. Much is discussed controversially - the debate is still in process. In spite of different modifications and a huge number of publications it must be stated that until today “the quiet victory”, respectively the numerous receptions of the theory of totalitarianism since 1989/91, have not led to any striking progress in knowledge - at least as the level of conception is concerned.

For several years the comparative research approach to dictatorships has experienced a shift of paradigm. Recently, research has concentrated more on the analysis of the contradictory dynamism of social processes as well as on the demands for political change in closed repressive systems. The theory of totalitarianism is still a valid concept for interpreting the new types of rule that were prevalent in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the concept needs to be adjusted to the challenges of research perspectives in the 21st century. This paper does not represent another attempt to “save” the theory of totalitarianism but a critical view on future research on the concept of totalitarianism, its content, its range and its perspectives.