Chapter 1: Authoritarian and single-party states

In the two outstanding examples of European totalitarianism, Soviet communism and Nazism, each was inspired by a passionate commitment to an ideology. In the Soviet case, it was Stalin’s class concepts that motivated his policies. He saw his prime purpose to be the destruction of all those he deemed to be the class enemies of the Soviet state. In the German case, it was Hitler’s notion of race that shaped his policies; he saw it as his destiny to rid Germany of all those he deemed to be racial inferiors.

Problems in analysis

Cultural and linguistic

In analysing authoritarian and single-party systems, what has to be allowed for is the wide difference between cultures. This is particularly important where concepts are concerned. Some words do not easily translate and political concepts sometimes shift their meaning or emphasis. An obvious example is ‘democracy’. In a Western liberal sense the word relates to the rights of the individual. In a Russian or Chinese context it refers to the rights of the group. That was why Mao and Stalin could use the word democracy unblushingly to describe the unchallengeable control of their single-party systems. In Western terms a single-party democracy is a contradiction in terms whereas for Julius Nyerere, the Tanzanian leader, the single-party system was the best means of achieving democracy (see pages 295–296).