Open Session: **"Totalitarian Technology"**

Organizer and Panelist:

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ABSTRACT

This panel applies Melvin Kranzberg's First Law of Technology to the special problem of technologies created by and for totalitarian political regimes. The story of the twentieth century in particular is one of technological progress harnessed both to support and defeat the forces of fascism, imperialism, and Stalinism. As Kranzberg would tell us, technologies themselves are neither inherently destructive nor liberating, but nor are they without political valence. Langdon Winner went further, arguing (not without controversy) that artifacts are indelibly stamped with the politics of their creation. Do some technologies have more political resonance than others, or are totalitarian technologies merely unlucky in their association with dictators? Does totalitarian technology have a "style" comparable to that of a region, as Thomas Hughes asserted? If so, whose interests does the style serve? Can totalitarian style be identified in advance, or only in retrospect? Are some technologies more politically "safe" than others?

"Technology is *neither good nor bad*; nor is it neutral," Kranzberg explained, but, to borrow from George Orwell, are some technologies more neutral than others?

This panel welcomes paper contributions from faculty, museum professionals, postgraduate scholars, independent historians, and graduate students on the development of technologies—*machines*, *materials*, *processes*, and *structures*—by, for (and even against) fascist and totalitarian regimes around the world during the twentieth century, with a specific focus on those developed and used during the middle decades of the century. Papers examining the aesthetics of technological choice, papers that explore the creation of distinct design styles, and papers that stretch the common understanding of the definition and scope of "technology" will be particularly well-received, as will papers from international scholars and those exploring these issues outside of the context of the United States.

I am an historian of technology and labor; my past work has focused extensively on the history of aerospace technologies. The paper I am proposing for this session, on fascist space technology, is framed as scholarly case study in technical choice. During the intellectually fruitful period between 1945 and 1950, several different engineering collectives in the United States vied to implement their unique ideas of space exploration. Based upon wartime visions of the militarization and expansion of space technology, the plans of German émigrés Wernher von Braun and Walter Dornberger—rocket-bombers, giant space stations, and nuclear rockets— hovered between techno-utopia and dystopic nightmare. Engineers working for the Navy, and a group of socialist experimentalists at the California Institute of Technology, though, offered competing paradigms of space exploration that present today's historians with tantalizing hints of a different—and possibly better—future in space than the one Americans would know. A PowerPoint presentation, including a short video clip, accompanies this paper.