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978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe caught the world by surprise. Today, however – more than two decades later – it is somehow assumed that communism *had* to fall. But if the collapse of communism was inevitable, why did several similar Marxist-Leninist regimes survive in other parts of the world, such as in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam?

It would be too simple to draw a dichotomy here between Europe and the developing world, according to which communist regimes in Europe were destined to collapse, while their counterparts in the developing world were not. Communist governments have fallen in Third World nations such as Cambodia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Mongolia, and Nicaragua; in Europe, Serbia's "degenerating," patrimonial communist regime under Slobodan Milošević managed to stay in power for over a decade before being overthrown by a popular uprising. The Serbian case shows that regime transition from communism was not automatic even in Europe.

No important scholarly work has compared the transitions from communism with the non-transitions.¹ Most authors either emphasize the similarities between the different cases of communist collapse in Europe, or else they confine themselves to single-country case studies.²

¹ Certain studies have made such comparisons, but they have lacked a systematic theoretical framework, and they have usually compared just one non-transition to one or several transitions. See, for example, Yangi Tong, *Transitions from State Socialism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), which compares China with Hungary.

² Some of the best-known works dealing with the collapse in general include: Michael Waller, *The End of the Communist Power Monopoly* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994); Daniel Chirot, "What Happened in Eastern Europe in 1989?" in Daniel Chirot, ed., *The Crisis of Leninism and the Decline of the Left: The Revolutions of 1989* (Seattle and London: University of Washington State, 1991), pp. 3–32; Giuseppe Di Palma, "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society," *World Politics*, 43:1 (1991): 49–80; Gale Stokes, "Lessons of the East European Revolutions of 1989," *Problems of Communism*, 40:5 (1991): 17–22; Marcia A. Weigle and Jim Butterfield, "Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes: The Logic of Emergence," *Comparative Politics*, 1 (1992): 1–24; and Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

Still others offer accounts of a largely descriptive and empirical nature.³ Some authors, such as Richard Sakwa and Archie Brown, do discuss the remaining communist regimes. Yet, they do not put much emphasis on them, seeing them as the last remnants of a dead movement. Their continued hold on power, therefore, does not require much theorizing. This standpoint is also evident from the titles of their respective books: *Postcommunism* (Sakwa) and *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Brown).⁴

To his credit, Brown develops a theory as to why some regimes have been able to maintain power: the key, he contends, lies in their resort to nationalism. He is correct, in my view, that the remaining regimes have all used nationalism as part of their strategy for keeping power. His model fails to explain, however, why other communist regimes of this type lost power (as in Nicaragua, Romania, or Serbia/rump Yugoslavia); nor does it specify what the conditions are that might induce the remaining states to fall.

Even those works dealing with Eastern Europe have tended to ignore the great diversity in both the types of communist regimes and the processes of the demise of communist rule. Yet it is essential to understand these different modes of transition if we are to understand the underlying mechanisms that brought down the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe.

Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, in their *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, represent the most important exception here. They distinguish between different processes of transition, according to different regime types; yet they too neglect the cases of continued communist rule.⁵ Certain recent works have focused on non-transitions, but they have

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). There is a very large literature dealing with the separate countries; suffice it here to point out a few of the most famous ones: Rudolf L. Tökes, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution: Economic Reform, Social Change and Political Succession* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bernard Wheaton and Zdeněk Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988–1991* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1992); Sigrid Meuschel on the GDR, "The End of East German Socialism," *Telos*, 82 (1989–90): 3–22; "Wandel durch Auflehnung: Thesen zum Verfall bürokratischer Herrschaft in der DDR," *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 1 (1991): 15–27 and *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992); George Sanford, ed., *Democratization in Poland, 1988–90: Polish Voices* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

³ Excluding purely journalistic accounts, the most famous empirical descriptions include: Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (London: Granta Books, 1990); and George Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993).

⁴ Richard Sakwa, *Postcommunism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999); and Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: Bodley Head, 2009).

⁵ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

normally only discussed one non-transition (usually the Chinese case) and compared it with one or more transitions.⁶

The neglect of non-transitions has been a missed analytical opportunity. Comparing cases where a transition did not take place to cases where it did helps us to understand better what is missing from the former. It helps us distinguish necessary from sufficient conditions for a transition from communism. Conditions present only in transitions are most likely to have been decisive for regime change. In addition, the comparative-versus-democratization debate – wherein specialists on Eastern Europe stress the peculiarities of each case, while “transitologists” permit themselves overarching generalizations – would be enhanced by a comparison of communist regimes *across* regions.⁷ Despite differences in culture and in type of regime, communist governments throughout the world have shared some crucial characteristics. Thus, transitions from them are more easily compared across regional boundaries than are transitions from most non-communist regimes.⁸

The communist countries that have not undergone transitions are of great policy importance. North Korea, for example, arguably represents the greatest danger for nuclear war in the world today.⁹ Cuba under Fidel Castro has long been one of the most vexing foreign policy issues for the US government. The Chinese economy is the largest and fastest-growing in the developing world today, and its advance is affecting the balance of trade in the industrialized countries (particularly the US). China is also a growing threat to the prevailing military and economic order, inasmuch as

⁶ Juan J. Lopez, *Democracy Delayed: The Case of Castro's Cuba* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), chapters 1 and 2. Pei compares the Soviet transition to the non-transition in China. Also see Mark R. Thompson, “To Shoot or Not to Shoot: China and Eastern Europe,” *Comparative Politics*, 34:1 (2001): 63–83; and Tong, *Transitions from State Socialism*.

⁷ For a critical account of this debate, see Valerie Bunce, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?,” *Slavic Review*, 54 (1995): 11–27. For a more balanced approach, see Bunce's later article, “Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 33:6–7 (2000): 703–34. In the later article, Bunce mentions “regional effects” in democratization, as cross-regional comparativists have also done. This neglects, however, the possibility of comparing similar regime types across regions.

⁸ There is a large literature discussing what communism is. I shall discuss this question later in this Introduction. Good overviews are provided in Stephen White, “What Is a Communist System?,” *Studies in Comparative Communism*, XVI, 16:4 (Winter 1983): 247–63; and Michael Waller and Bogdan Szajkowski, “The Communist Movement: From Monolith to Polymorph,” in Bogdan Szajkowski, ed., *Marxist Governments: A World Survey*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1981), vol. I, pp. 1–19.

⁹ See, for example, James T. Laney and Jason T. Shaplen, “How to Deal With North Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, 82:2 (2003).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

its military is emerging as one of the strongest in the world, and its economy is already the sixth largest.¹⁰ Many observers predict that, over the course of the coming decades, the Chinese economy will become the world's largest.¹¹ Though a much smaller economy, Vietnam has recently been held up by the World Bank as a model for other developing countries.¹² Comparisons with onetime communist states in Eastern Europe and elsewhere may shed greater light on this still-existing communism.

Defining communist rule

Despite the tendency to lump all communist regimes together, important differences have existed among them. As Linz and Stepan show, these regimes do not stand still; rather, they develop in a variety of directions. Notwithstanding their many cultural and institutional differences, however, communist regimes have all subscribed to a common political religion, derived from a common ideological model. Following Eric Voegelin, we may see communism as a political religion.¹³ It has a collection of clearly set-out beliefs, with strong eschatological and messianic qualities; it has holy texts (by Marx, Engels, and Lenin); it has a pope (the general secretary); and it boasts a "priesthood" (the party functionaries). As an ideological model, Leninist communism claims a monopoly on Truth, and calls for a one-party state and a state-run economy. In such a system, the rule of the Party is based on ideological legitimacy, not popular consent.¹⁴ The general secretary/pope knows the Truth, since he (and it is always a man) is best able to interpret the holy texts. The party functionaries/priests, in turn, are best able to carry out his orders. Unlike democracy, which implies multiple interpretations of the Truth, communism recognizes only one interpretation thereof. Consequently, it sees little need for democratic-pluralist institutions. Since the Party knows what is correct, moreover, it is best suited to running the economy. The texts of Marx and Lenin supply further

¹⁰ By 2004, it had already become the world's sixth-largest economy. See David Barboza, "China's Economy Even Larger than Thought," *New York Times*, December 21, 2005.

¹¹ For example, *The Economist*, July 6, 2011.

¹² For a discussion, see for example Jean-Pierre Cling, Mireille Razafindrakoto, and François Roubaud, "Desperately Seeking Model Countries: The World Bank in Vietnam," DIAL working paper DT/2009-04, September 2009, downloaded from www.dial.prd.fr on January 20, 2010.

¹³ Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1986; 1st German edn. 1938); and Philippe Burrin, "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," *History and Memory*, 9:1-2, (1997): 321-9. I am grateful to Mark Thompson for pointing out this allegory of politics as religion.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of this, see Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall: A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland* (Amsterdam/London: Harwood Academic/Routledge 2001), Chapter 5.

Cambridge University Press

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Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ammunition, since they proclaim the superiority of planned economies over their market counterparts. This analysis basically follows the argument of Giuseppe Di Palma, to the effect that communist regimes base their legitimacy on two claims: to superior economic performance, and to a monopoly on Truth.¹⁵

Despite these basic tenets, communism can take many forms – from totalitarian systems based on mass terror (the Stalin and Pol Pot regimes) to relatively open and tolerant regimes like those of Hungary in the late 1980s and Yugoslavia under Tito. Communism is an ideology that is subject to various interpretations. There may be a “Rome” (Moscow), even if there is also a “Constantinople” (Belgrade under Josip Broz Tito, Beijing under Mao Zedong). Communism was a truly international model, spreading from Europe to Asia, Latin America, and Africa. There is a central canon, along with common rituals, practices, and habits. *More than any other modern regime form, communism displays commonalities across its different regimes.* Despite the national peculiarities of different communist countries, and the many variations communist rule has assumed in these countries, all communist regimes have followed the basic pattern of one-party rule, Party-state control over the economy, and (at least initially) a coherent ideology based on Marx and Lenin. However, communist parties that are out of power – or which are trying to consolidate it – may at times accept some forms of pluralism. This was the case with the National Fronts in Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1948. It is true that greatly deformed, personalized dictatorships have emerged in North Korea or Romania, but even these regimes came to power based on Marxist-Leninist ideologies, and must be understood within the framework of a *degenerating* Marxism-Leninism.

Although communist regimes can take on many forms and even degenerate into patrimonial, personalized dictatorships, they still have more in common with one another than do the regimes of any other modern political-economic system. Capitalist regimes can take many political-economic forms – from fascist and national-socialist dictatorships to liberal democracies and developmental dictatorships. Capitalism has also been able to incorporate such diverse ideologies as liberalism, conservatism, Christian democracy, social democracy, and ecologism.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Di Palma, “Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society,” *World Politics*, 44:1 (1991): 49–79. However, Di Palma terms this “legitimacy from the top.” I find this term awkward, among other things because it does not explain *what kind* of legitimacy communist regimes have; nor does it tell us the basis of the said legitimacy. It only tells us where it comes from. I also find the term problematic, because – as Di Palma admits – it is not just the top (i.e. party leaders) who believe in the ideology; originally, some intellectuals and workers do so as well.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

Communism, by contrast, has only allowed for certain national variations on Marxist-Leninist doctrine.

While capitalism can take on many ideologies, Marxist-Leninist ideology matters for communist regimes, even when those regimes are in a state of severe decay. A communist regime that abandons its ideology is likely to encounter severe problems, even when the society “pragmatically accepts” its rule for a time on the grounds that it is performing reasonably well, given the structural constraints of the communist system.¹⁶ This helps explain the contortions that the communist regime in China has gone through to justify market reforms. If ideology were irrelevant, the Chinese would have abandoned it long ago. Archie Brown goes so far as to claim that the Chinese Communist Party leaders had even considered giving up the name “Communist,” but decided against it for fear that the more orthodox members who still believed in the ideology would abandon the Party and start a new one. Chinese Party leaders decided against the name change, not because they still believed in Marxist-Leninist ideology, but because they wanted to prevent the emergence of a competitive party system. Thus, even when Party leaders no longer believe in the ideology, they still feel somewhat bound by it. As should now be clear to the reader, “communism” is used in this book to describe a really existing political movement, as opposed to the kind of classless, stateless society that Marx believed would arise from the ashes of capitalism.

Choice of countries

Now that communist regimes have been defined in terms of a political religion, forced to struggle on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology in order to legitimize their rule, it is necessary to distinguish between *transitions* and *non-transitions* from communism. The term “transitions” comes from the democratization literature, and is usually defined as a *political* transformation. For the purposes of this book, a communist-led regime is no longer communist when the communist party loses political power, even if great changes have taken place in the economic system or socio-economic structures. Consequently, China and Vietnam represent a non-transition despite the dramatic changes in their economic systems. The Communist Party still rules these countries, and does not allow any opposition parties. It continues to hold monopoly control over the main mass media, although its control over information has been severely undermined by the Internet. The party still claims to be socialist, and

¹⁶ For a discussion of pragmatic acceptance, see Saxonberg, *The Fall*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

though party leaders may no longer believe in Marxism-Leninism, they still claim to be Marxist-Leninists, building a socialist society. It should also be noted that in both these countries, although the private sector is growing, the most important economic sector is the mixed “cooperative” sector, where state bureaucrats co-founded half of all private companies. Thus, the state still exerts great control over the economy, albeit in a somewhat unorthodox fashion.

From a strict Marxian perspective, one could claim that China and Vietnam are indeed experiencing a transition – from a command economy to a type of state capitalism. While this is indeed the case, it is significant that these countries are experiencing this transition under the continued rule of communist parties that profess to be leading their countries toward some type of “socialism.” Thus, in an outcome at odds with deterministic interpretations of Marxism, changes at the base have not so far led to changes in the political superstructure – a fact worthwhile for social scientists to try to explain.

Some non-Marxian social scientists still analyze the seeming contradiction between having a communist-led dictatorship with a supposedly “socialist” ideology and the introduction of clearly capitalist reforms, but take a view that is as deterministic as orthodox Marxists. For example, Sakwa claims that China is experiencing an “evolutionary exit from communism.”¹⁷ This approach simply assumes that the regime *must* fall, without explaining how or when it might be expected to fall.

In contrast to the democratization literature, this book is concerned with transitions *from* communism rather than *to* democracy. The focus is on whether communist regimes maintain or lose power. This study does not consider the nature of the post-communist regimes. It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss, for example, why the Slovak Republic under Mečiar developed in a more authoritarian manner than the Czech Republic under Klaus. Nor does this book consider whether the elections in Ethiopia are truly democratic, or whether the authoritarian tendencies of Putin and Yeltsin have hindered the consolidation of democracy in Russia. In the case of many former Soviet republics in Asia, the regimes are openly authoritarian and make no pretense of being democratic. What is important here, however, is the fact neither the Soviet Union nor its communist regime still exist. We may thus conclude that these Asian republics have indeed undergone a transition *from* communist rule (even if members of the former *nomenklatura* have managed to maintain power in some of the Asian republics).

¹⁷ Sakwa, *Postcommunism*, p. 33.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

The Soviet and Yugoslav cases also bring up the issue of stateness. The concern of this book is with the collapse of communist regimes, which here means the communist states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. I do not investigate whether communist parties still in power in certain Asian ex-Soviet republics can be considered cases of non-transition, because the Soviet Union as a communist state no longer exists. Nevertheless, I do pay some attention to the Baltic republics, to show how the revolutionary potential of the periphery helped bring down the communist regime at its core in Russia. Similarly, in Yugoslavia, the revolutionary potential of the peripheral republics in Croatia and Slovenia helped bring about the collapse of the Yugoslav federation as a communist entity. Because Serbia was the core state, and continued to see itself as officially part of Yugoslavia (in contrast to Russia, which ceased to consider itself part of the Soviet Union), I discuss the communist regime's continued rule in that country – in its degenerated, patrimonial form under Milošević.

Serbia under Milošević presents the trickiest case of a non-transition regime. In Croatia, the communist regime had already fallen when Franjo Tuđman won the first elections. In Serbia, by contrast, the same regime remained in power until mass protests brought it down nearly a decade later. Both countries have in common that they had semi-free elections, multiparty systems, and authoritarian rulers.

However, the Milošević regime was a clearer case of communist continuation than was the Tuđman government. First, Milošević came to power by taking over and transforming the League of Communists, while Tuđman came to power by *defeating* the communists in elections. Milošević thus represented continuity, while Tuđman represented change.

Second, Milošević never portrayed himself as an anti-Titoist. He never questioned the establishment of a one-party state based on Marxism-Leninism, and he never claimed to be a supporter of capitalism. Rather, his criticism of Tito was limited to the constitutional changes of the 1960s and 1970s. These, he believed, had weakened Serbia, by making Kosovo an autonomous republic, and undermined the position of Serbs living in non-Serbian republics. Tuđman, on the other hand, questioned the entire Titoist project, and declared communism a total failure and mistake.

Third, Milošević never entirely abandoned socialist ideology. He continued to call his party “socialist,” and to maintain the traditional communist party structure of a central committee and politburo. (One should recall that the communist parties in East Germany, Hungary, and Poland had all changed their names to “socialist” in the 1940s, but this did not prevent them from establishing Marxist-Leninist dictatorships.)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Given his party's professed ideology, Milošević was in no hurry to privatize industry and he came into constant conflict with the West.

Tudjman, by contrast, decisively broke with all socialist symbols and replaced them with Croatian nationalist symbols, such as a new national flag that was similar to that of the clerical-fascist Ustashe regime during World War II. As an anti-communist, moreover, he was eager to cooperate with the West despite his authoritarian rule. Furthermore, he put a much higher priority on privatization than Milošević did. Tudjman lost no time in making known Croatia's desire to join NATO and the EU. Tudjman also quickly acceded to Western pressure on many issues, such as cooperating with Muslim Bosnians in a confederation within Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Milošević diverged greatly from the traditional Leninist model of communism, as he renamed the Party and allowed multiparty and semi-free elections. However, this loss of ideological legitimacy and abandonment of portions of the Leninist model were all merely reactions to regime weakening and degeneration. The move to nationalism was a last desperate attempt to maintain power. It was a sign of weakness rather than of strength, and it set off the dynamics that would ultimately bring down the regime. The nationalist gambit succeeded in prolonging communist rule for another decade, but at great human cost. As Adam Westoby notes, communist rule is extremely malleable. "The common ingredient is a formal one: Leninist theory and its organizational expression – the party. But this . . . has malleability at its heart, even though the apparent rigidity of its formulations can inflame the disputations to which different practical applications give rise."¹⁸ Milošević's attempt at staying in power while Yugoslavia was collapsing and most of the previous republics of the country were introducing multiparty systems shows just how malleable communist regimes can be when trying to adapt to changing situations. While it may be somewhat controversial to maintain that Milošević represented a continuation of the communist regime, I will argue in later chapters that Milošević's use of nationalism to save a regime that had lost its ideological legitimacy could indicate the paths that China (and to some extent Vietnam) might take if they face an economic crisis.

Although the East European and Asian cases (except rump Yugoslavia) are relatively easy to classify, that of Nicaragua is thornier. The Sandinistas did not call their party "communist," and they claimed to be democratic. In addition, they held and won elections, which according

¹⁸ Adam Westoby, *The Evolution of Communism* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), p. 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02388-8 - Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam

Steven Saxonberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

to international observers were conducted fairly and democratically (although the opposition complained about such factors as a lack of access to paper for running their electoral campaign). Nevertheless, and despite pluralist elements, the Sandinista regime had a Leninist faction, and Marxism-Leninism was the Party's official ideology.

The limits of the regime's consolidation have to do with what I refer to in this book as "failed totalitarianism." In certain respects, the Sandinista regime faced a situation similar to that of communist parties in the "national front" coalition governments in Central Europe in the years immediately following World War II. In these instances, the communists acted relatively democratically and formed coalition governments. In some cases, such as Czechoslovakia, leftist parties formed a clear majority and might have been able to bring about a democratic transition to "socialism." It is also possible that, under such conditions, the reformist faction among the communists could have maintained power, and that even the hardliners would have accepted democracy. Of course, we cannot know what would have happened if Josef Stalin had not ordered the communist parties to seize power, and to carry out massive purges within their own ranks in order to eliminate reformist, national-communist elements.

Like the communists in Eastern Europe after the war, the Sandinistas too held elections and formed coalition governments. They too had reformist leaders and a hardline faction. However, rather than facing pressure from Stalin to seize power and to purge reformers, the Sandinistas faced pressure from the US to give up their socialist ideals and to negotiate with the anti-socialist Contras. Thus, it is reasonable, notwithstanding some ambiguity here, to label the Sandinista regime a "failed totalitarian" one. Its behavior was namely similar to that of communist parties in early postwar Central and Eastern Europe (1945–8); furthermore, it seems to have shared the Marxist-Leninist goals of those parties. It failed, however, to gain full control over the state apparatus. Communists in Eastern Europe were able to move beyond the national fronts and to consolidate their rule in *de facto* one-party states; the Sandinistas were not.¹⁹

Grenada is another sticky case, given that the regime never claimed openly to be Marxist-Leninist. Nevertheless, captured documents clearly show that the entire leadership of the New Jewel Movement considered itself to be Marxist-Leninist. Thus, I have decided to classify the regime in

¹⁹ Officially, however, several of these states – e.g., Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland – were multiparty states, given the formal presence in their parliaments of certain small parties allied with the communists.