

General Introduction

The History of Communism and the Global History of the Twentieth Century

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Crucial questions regarding communism aroused intense debates throughout the twentieth century. These concerned the relative importance of ideology, politics and social circumstances in the Russian Revolution and other communist revolutions; the relationship between subjective intentions and longer-term structural processes; the balance between the destruction and achievements brought about by communist experiences; and even the very possibility of defining communism as a unitary phenomenon. The archival opening that took place in the last quarter-century redefined the terms of such debates and provided material for re-posing them – notably from the perspective of the fall of the European communist regimes and the Soviet Union, and from the perspective of China’s transformation. However, a deeper revision of our thinking is developing as we make a sustained effort to embed communist history in the wider context of the last century’s history, both enriching scholarly understanding and suggesting comparisons, connections and interactions inside and outside the communist world. Such an effort poses old questions in a new light and opens up fresh queries for scholarship.

What follows is a discussion of some relevant issues, which aims to provide a sense of how they are debated by historians. There can be no single prism through which to read this work – still less a summary or consensus of ideas among authors who instead offer a pluralistic landscape of approaches, priorities and interpretations. I will focus on three moments in the interface between communist history and a number of twentieth-century global vectors. First, the context of the “age of wars” as a decisive experience for the establishment of communism as a world network and an alternative project to Western capitalism. Second, the emergence of communism as

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a global force in the aftermath of World War II and in connections between the socialist camp, the Cold War and decolonization. Third, the multiple trajectories of the decline, fragmentation, collapse, and transformation of communism in the context of growing global interdependence during the late twentieth century and after.

A World Project in the “Age of Wars”

At the end of World War I, the Bolsheviks and their followers thought of themselves as both the heirs of a revolutionary tradition in the lineage of the French Jacobins and Marxism, and as the protagonists of a new cycle of modern revolution set in motion by the cataclysmic consequences of total war. Any assessment of the emergence of twentieth-century communist revolution must properly recognize the importance of wartime experience and its legacy. The uneven and combined development of modern industrial societies, mass politics and imperialism had a history even before World War I, and had already exerted a profound impact on the development of socialist movements. However, the violent collapse of an entire world order invited radical projects for reshaping not only European civilization but also its global domination. The mobilization brought about by the war effort shattered traditional political and cultural patterns and fueled heterogeneous responses. The Bolsheviks provided their own response in terms of world revolution. They claimed Marxist legitimacy while condemning prewar social democracy for its betrayal of internationalism. Lenin’s vision of imperialism as an inherently catastrophic global system gave rise to a new kind of internationalism. He envisaged turning the reality of mass violence into the program of a “party of civil war.” The Bolsheviks’ belief in a regimented intervention to accomplish social revolution had roots in subversive activities under the autocratic regime, but was also a product of the devastating impact of the war on Russian institutions and society. The subjective element and the capacity to mobilize active minorities had a crucial impact as state authority collapsed in the aftermath of the February Revolution. Disputes regarding the Bolshevik Revolution as a *coup d’état* or an outcome of social unrest channeled by revolutionaries will probably continue endlessly. However, historians are inclined to focus more on the political, social and international factors which made possible the consolidation and endurance of revolutionary power.

Militarization became a central feature of revolutionary power as the civil war broke out and mass violence continued beyond the end of the world war.

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The Bolsheviks had founded their own party on principles established by Lenin and criticized by, among others, Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. But it was in the civil war that the party became the state's chief body and a mass organization of hundreds of thousands, with the *levée en masse* to the Red Army. The revolutionary regime achieved territorial sovereignty by means of military conquest in Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The improvised social and economic measures undertaken by the "dictatorship of the proletariat" took on the character of "war communism" and gave rise to a centralized "command economy" inspired by Germany's war effort. October 1917 became a model and a symbol for Lenin's new combination of warfare and politics, adapting Clausewitz's dictum to the era of the masses. The Leninist project encountered a massive wave of social turmoil in Europe as a result of the suffering and evils of war. As self-mobilized workers in a number of countries created councils on the Russian pattern, the impulse toward European revolution raised opposing hopes and fears. The defeat of the Spartacist uprising in Germany and the fall of the Soviet republic in Hungary put at the center of politics the conflict between revolution and the counterrevolution. Social polarization and radical politicization affected most European countries. Communist efforts to organize insurgency crossed paths with spontaneous social unrest.

However, the main elements of this picture rapidly changed. The Bolshevik regime's struggle for survival implied a shift of focus from society to the state in Russia, while across Europe the energy of social mobilization declined or was suppressed. By late summer 1920, the Red Army had won the civil war. But in spite of Lenin's hopes, it failed to incite mass upheaval in Poland and elsewhere in Central Europe. The primacy of state power made even more sense for the Bolsheviks after the paradoxical outcome of victory in the Russian Civil War and defeat for the European revolution. Even if society remained the theater for mobilization and the formation of class-consciousness, state power became crucial not only as the prerequisite for social transformation, but also for the future of the revolution besieged by a hostile world. The prospect of an "international civil war" arose out of the Russian Civil War. As Lenin stated while reflecting on defeat in Poland, "until now we have acted as a single force against the whole world . . . But now Russia has said: We will see who is stronger in war . . . This is a shift in politics as a whole, world politics."¹

¹ Richard Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 99–100.

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The Bolsheviks basically understood the social and international compromises necessary for undertaking the country's reconstruction to be a strategic retreat. They detected the menace of counterrevolution both in the potential insubordination of peasants on Russian and Ukrainian land – which had been the theater of coercion, rebellion and repression throughout the civil war – and in the world-system dominated by Western powers, which represented “capitalist encirclement” of the revolution. Such perception of threats was crucial even to the national construction of the Soviet Union. In its contending elaborations, the one fixed point was that a powerful center should rule over the peripheries – even if also acknowledging their cultural autonomy – both to promote modernizing measures and to prevent the threat of foreign intervention. The identification of converging threats from within and from without fueled a longlasting narrative.

Few historians would today provide a single definition of communist identity. We see better now how communist ideology and culture, with all their dogmatic axioms, always constituted a contested domain. Scholars have to constantly work both to contextualize their influence and understand their changing shape.² Communists did not embrace violence as a means in itself – unlike fascists – though they accepted it as historically necessary and as an inevitable condition created by war. If the *pars destruens* of the revolution frequently prevailed over its *pars construens*, revolutionary ideology was not simply an ideology of violence. The powerful emancipatory thrust of revolution and state-led policies in education, cultural life and gender relations – radically reconceptualized from what the socialist prewar tradition had been – could thus coexist with the idea that civil peace was not around the corner. Aspirations to forge a new human condition liberated from class alienation, racial oppression, and traditional gender roles, with all their contradictions, contributed to strengthening a Manichean worldview focused on the clash between revolution and counterrevolution, and the expectation of the liberating potential of war. Even if a century later historians may find it difficult to empathize with such ways of pursuing justice, equality, freedom and development, they need to convey an understanding of how violence and idealism went together.³ The fabric of the war experience and the vision

2 For one example, see David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (New York: Grove Press, 2009).

3 Stephen A. Smith, “The Historiography of the Russian Revolution 100 Years On,” *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, 4 (Fall 2015), 733–49.

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of the “international civil war” provided a unifying thread for the vaguely defined prospect of an egalitarian society, which had no blueprint in the Marxist tradition.

Among all the new driving forces emerging from the collapse of the global order, the Bolshevik Revolution was probably the most influential in reshaping social and political landscapes. In the immediate postwar period, the Wilsonian project of national self-determination may have had a wider impact in the colonial world. Nevertheless, as it soon became clear that principles of self-determination would not be applied to overseas empires, the overlap between revolution in Russia and the emerging crisis of the colonial system provided communism with a potentially global profile that prewar social democracy had lacked. The Bolsheviks were able to see new revolutionary opportunities opening up for the overthrow of Western imperialism. The impact and reception of the Russian Revolution reflected multiple transnational meanings gravitating around the establishment of the first socialist state in human history and a new sense of internationalism. Even the concepts of class and nation could overlap with each other. The meaning of revolution as salvation or damnation had no limits in space, though it aroused opposing passions primarily in Europe. Friends and foes of the revolution rapidly increased in numbers. The containment of revolution was a top priority at Versailles, where the great powers gathered to chart the postwar order. Anti-communists labeled communists as “agents of Moscow.” Anti-Bolshevism provided a “glue” for radical nationalist movements ready to restore order by violent means. Red scares took place in Central Europe as well as in the United States – showing how the fear of communism implied preemptive violence against workers’ movements. Marx’s famous image of the specter of communism haunting Europe appeared more likely than ever at a time when it could also spread over other continents.

Although revolutionary Russia was soon marginalized, communism played a role on the European scene and beyond. Even more than analogies with the French Revolution, what captured people’s imagination was the sense that no iron laws of society or economics could really restrain the popular will as it emerged in wartime. The young socialist intellectual Antonio Gramsci expressed such a feeling immediately after the October Revolution, writing that the Bolshevik Revolution was a revolution against Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* – by which he meant against its positivist interpretation, which assumed that socialist revolution could only take place in advanced capitalist countries. “Marx predicted what was predictable” –

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Gramsci wrote – “He could not foresee the European war.”⁴ Reality would soon show that the idea of jumping into an entirely new historical time implied risks of self-delusion. But even later the ideal of politics in command would be of considerable importance for Bolshevism’s followers worldwide. Such an interpretation of the Russian Revolution was inspiring in colonial and underdeveloped countries, where revolutionaries had to envisage their prospects by emphasizing the role of avant-gardes and by redefining the social bases for revolution – as for instance in the work of the Peruvian revolutionary José Carlos Mariátegui. For communists who experienced the interwar years, the common ground for collective identity was, in Eric J. Hobsbawm’s words, the idea that “no change was beyond their reach” – an idea strengthened by the sense of being engaged in a “total war,” the construction of an imagined international community, and the commitment to sacrifice for the progress of mankind.⁵

The world impact of communism should not be understood solely through the lens of the ideas and myths of revolution. As communist parties were founded in Europe, Asia and Latin America in the wake of the world war, they soon created the most significant world political network that had ever been seen. This “party of world revolution” was construed as a hyper-centralized organization under the Moscow-based auspices of the Comintern and aimed at establishing social roots in competition with socialists and nationalists. Both objectives proved difficult to achieve and conflicted with one another. Communists’ militant dedication, sense of discipline and hierarchical subordination to Moscow were usually undisputed, but keeping together Soviet interests and local actors soon started to provoke conflicts. Furthermore, the emphasis on ideological purity and disciplined organization frequently were at odds with expanded social reach. Communist parties were not able to gain the allegiance of the majority of workers and militants from Europe’s socialist parties, mainly attracting small groups of intellectuals and activists. Even the biggest communist party – the Communist Party of Germany – could hardly compete with social democracy in terms of numbers. The basic problem was that many communist parties were founded only when the early postwar revolutionary thrust had been consumed. They were a product of defeat, and not of triumphant revolution. The task of

4 Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti (1910–1926)*, vol. II, 1917, ed. L. Rapone (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2015), 618.

5 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Abacus, 2003), 136–38.

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building organizations in view of longer-term revolutionary scenarios made them particularly dependent on the Soviet Union.

Still, most historians have underestimated the global significance of communists outside power, even if they experienced only defeats – regardless of their compliance or defiance to directives from the “center.”⁶ The point is not their autonomy from or subordination to Moscow, which has often been the object of inconclusive debates. They did disseminate transnational seeds. The Comintern headquarters in Moscow combined internationalism with cosmopolitan characteristics. Communist parties in different regions and countries were a product of encounters between “professional revolutionaries” who soon started traveling across the world and local groups of militants, activists and intellectuals. Envoys from Moscow interacted and often clashed with established revolutionary groups active in trade unions, factories and urban environments. Moscow was the obvious hub, but the local bureaus provided transnational connections in Berlin and Vienna as well as in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Buenos Aires. Political education passed mainly through Moscow but also occurred elsewhere, for instance through exchanges between the metropolis and colonies of European empires in which there coexisted both integrating functions and conflicting transfers.

At the same time, communists increasingly looked at the Soviet Union and its socialist modernization as a vital horizon for their revolutionary mission elsewhere. The “construction of socialism” was crucial in terms of identity and incentives. It fortified the distance between the social-democratic rescue of the primacy of politics over economics in order to reform capitalism, and the meaning of such a notion in communist culture, which implied anti-capitalism, mass mobilization and the use of violence.⁷ The Bolsheviks combined state-building as a response to external threats with the perspective of state-led modernization. This itself entailed forced industrialization and further social sacrifices, rationalized on the basis of teleological belief. Stalin’s choices closely intertwined “war scares” and extreme pressure for modernization. The original ideal of world revolution came to depend on the success of an inward-looking “revolution from above,” and the measure of success was the strength of state security, regardless of its narrow social support.

Class-based categories that had always had both domestic and international implications sparked the peacetime escalation of violence, with

6 Joachim C. Häberlen, “Between Global Aspirations and Local Realities: The Global Dimension of Interwar Communism,” *Journal of Global History* 7, 3 (2012), 415–37.

7 Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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deportations, famine and mass death on an unprecedented scale in the aftermath of collectivization, particularly in Ukraine in 1932–33 – which have been the object of an enormous advance in terms of historical knowledge in recent years. Scholarly analyses have also shifted their focus from the top-to-bottom exercise of power to the complexity of interactions between the state and society. The propaganda state employed powerful techniques to mobilize the masses and shape the disciplinary norms of personal conduct. However, discursive strategies and ways of self-identification also implied forms of social negotiation and resistance. The Bolshevik language was only superficially omnipresent and was hardly capable of penetrating society in depth in the Soviet Union. In this light, state-led violence should be seen both as a consequence of class warfare and as a response to failures in attaining effective social mobilization.

The Bolsheviks generally saw the reconstruction of Europe and the European democracies, particularly Weimar Germany, in much the same way as they saw prospects for civil peace in the Soviet Union – namely, as a temporary truce in a volatile state of affairs. Stalin defined his objectives in a way that left no doubt as to the connection between forced modernization and the expectation of a new war, all the more so in the wake of the Great Depression in the West. In 1931 he famously stated, “We are fifty to a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make up this gap in ten years. Either we do it, or they will crush us.” In 1932, he added that without accelerated industrialization the Soviet Union would be downgraded to a subjugated territory like China.⁸ By linking overcoming backwardness with the protection of sovereignty against imperialist threats, Stalin’s vision established an archetype for future communist experiences. At the same time, the Bolsheviks’ Europe-focused perspective on world power persisted, hindering understanding of the emergence of a new American hegemonic order. This only became an object of reflection among dissidents like Trotsky or, much more sharply, Gramsci in his prison writings in the early 1930s.

Stalin’s “revolution from above” raised the enthusiasm and self-confidence of communists. Though dissidents saw “socialism in one country” as a betrayal of world revolution, most communists identified with this notion, in the belief that the creation of a socialist society was an attainable goal. The Great Depression bolstered Stalinist state-building as it confirmed

⁸ *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) 1923–1938gg.* (3 vols. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), vol. III, 584.

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communist messianic prophecies of the breakdown of capitalism. Where Marx depicted capitalist modernity as a simultaneously destructive and dynamic force, communists mainly portrayed a catastrophic and chaotic vision. Even if extreme nationalist forces now became the protagonists of social mobilization in Germany and Central Europe, what counted more for them was that the gigantic Soviet economic and social mobilization had the greatest impact on world dynamics. Not only communists conferred high credibility on a promise of progress focused on the Promethean forces of the Soviet state and industry, unconstrained by private interests. Stalin's modernization appeared to provide the most credible response to the collapse of capitalist *laissez-faire*, while the crisis of liberal democracy made totalitarian rule more acceptable. Outstanding intellectuals and "fellow travelers" contributed to extending beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union the idea that Stalinist economic planning and social engineering represented a noncapitalist civilization and an "alternative modernity."

Communists saw the collapsing world order in the 1930s as an inevitable extension of the fall of empires occurring in the wake of World War I. There were several good reasons for establishing such a link in the remaking of the global order.⁹ However, Marxist-Leninist ideology created a deterministic mechanism which ironically prioritized the iron laws of history over subjective intervention and the primacy of politics. Communists misunderstood Hitler's rise to power, as they considered radical nationalism as subordinate to the decay of capitalist civilization. At the decisive moment of the Nazi rise to power, they were mainly fighting social democracy. The vision of a permanent state of war decisively affected the establishment of the command economy, the growth of the Gulag system, the displacement and deportation of peoples, the promotion and annihilation of elites, and the emergence of despotic rule over hugely bureaucratized institutions. Historians will continue debating whether Soviet communism is best understood in terms of exceptionalism or shared modernity, but that experience is certainly inseparable from the catastrophic developments of the interwar period.¹⁰

⁹ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, "Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Inter-War Conjuncture," *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, 1 (Winter 2001), 111–64. See recently Anna Krylova, "Soviet Modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament," *Contemporary European History* 23, 2 (2014), 167–92; Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

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These developments shaped the identities of communists well beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union – even those who forged distinctive revolutionary paths, like the Chinese communists. The 1927 massacre of communists in Shanghai and Guangzhou by the Guomindang was the prelude to a protracted struggle linking guerrilla warfare with the creation of revolutionary base areas for two decades. Within a few years, the Chinese communists fielded organized armies while shifting their social bases toward the peasantry to an extent that Lenin had never imagined. Following the epic experience of the Long March in 1934–35, armed resistance and civil conflicts extended to a new plane. In 1936–37, the coincidence between the Spanish Civil War and the Japanese invasion of China provided a decisive conjuncture for the global extension of the relationship between communists and “international civil war.” In both instances, communist parties achieved mass support and decisive influence in the fire of civil war. The paradox was that Spain and China gave fresh impetus to internationalist faith and militant dedication to the fight against fascism and imperialism, while such impetus could become a crime in the Soviet Union.

Stalinism inhibited the internationalist vocation through terror. Yet the planetary extension of the communist movement still persisted in the 1930s. Even the transfer of Soviet patterns and their reception gave rise to multifaceted outcomes. Moscow’s disciplinary strategy – establishing a single prototype of the revolutionary party and militancy shaped in conformity with the Soviet model of “democratic centralism” – was subject to strains, adaptation and resistance. As historians increasingly see it, the consequence was much more hybridization than a replication of the original archetypes – as symbols, practices, pedagogies and institutions such as the “cult of personality” had transnational diffusion but also multiple variants when transplanted to other cultures. In Europe, the project of de-social-democratizing workers and intellectuals started out as the imposition of an authoritarian pedagogy from above, but it also eventually gave rise to generational and social variations.¹¹ We may see here the roots of longer-term ambivalent developments – as communists everywhere antagonized social democrats but their political culture was hardly unified around a single unchanging blueprint. In China, India, Latin America and Africa, the weakness of the tradition of an organized workers’ movement and the influence of

¹¹ Brigitte Studer, “Stalinization: Balance Sheet of a Complex Notion,” in Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley (eds.), *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917–53* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 45–65.