

WHAT WAS COMMUNISM?¹

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Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: Ecco; London: Bodley, 2009), 720 pp + xv;

David Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: The Grove Press, 2009), 675 pp + xxvii;

Robert Service, *Comrades: A History of World Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 571 pp + xviii.

Communism's lifespan was a mere 140 years, from the fiery prose of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* to the storming of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. What began as the musings of a handful of exiled intellectuals metastasized into a global movement that ruled one third of the world's population and transformed the character of the modern state. The story of communism has a clear trajectory with a beginning, middle, and end. Both the rise and fall of communist regimes was spectacular and unexpected, though the middle period was often somewhat dull and predictable.

As the 21st century unfolds and communism recedes in the rear view mirror, it may start to appear as a passing fancy, a dead-end detour on the road to the triumph of liberal capitalism, as celebrated in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History."³ However, during communism's century and a half of existence it was seen as a serious challenge to the liberal-democratic model of social organization. The appearance of communism coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism and the nation-state, so some understanding of communism is clearly necessary to make sense of the modern world.

Communism is a sprawling, complex phenomenon. It spread from Europe, to Asia, to Africa, and Latin America. It saw itself as a new stage of human civilization: it involved not just a system of economic management and political control, but also a theory of aesthetics, a set of cultural practices, and even an urban architectural style. It is a daunting challenge to sift through the historical record and come up with a coherent, unified account, one that identifies the main structural features while at the same time doing justice to the complexity and nuances of historical experience. It leads one to question to what extent communism can be said to exist as a single, distinct, coherent object, amenable to explication within the covers of a single book.

This essay will proceed by discussing some general themes in the history of communism, before proceeding to individual comments about the books in turn.

The contradictions of communism

¹ *Russian History*, 37: 4, 2010, 427-47.

² Thanks to Valerie Sperling and Khachig Tololyan for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

³ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* 16, summer 1989.

Perhaps the best place to begin is the magisterial three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism*, written by Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish philosopher turned Oxford don, in the 1970s.⁴ Kolakowski, himself an ex-Marxist, distinguished between three phases of Marxism: a body of ideas about the laws of history; a set of techniques for creating a mass movement of industrial workers; and a technology of state power. The first phase involved intellectuals in libraries, writing books and formulating grand theories. The second phase saw those theories boiled down into simplistic slogans and principles that could form the basis for a mass movement. However, in this second phase a gap emerged between those who wanted a mass movement oriented towards the demands of average workers, and those who wanted a narrower, disciplined group of devoted revolutionaries. The first track was exemplified by the German Social Democratic Party, whose hopes for a democratic transfer of power were derailed by the Great War. The second track of course was championed by Vladimir Lenin.

Marx's contemporary, the anarchist thinker Mikhail Bakunin, had warned that Marx's focus on the seizure of state power was a recipe for disaster. In the early 1900s socialist Robert Michels had posited the "iron law of oligarchy," arguing that the leaders of an organization will inevitably substitute their own views and interests for those of its mass membership. The prophetic warnings of Bakunin and Michels were more than fulfilled under the Soviet state created by Lenin and Stalin.

Much to his own surprise, the exigencies of the First World War gave Lenin the chance to seize power in Russia. The 1917 revolution was a violation of Marx's theory of history, in that it took place in a country where the industrial working class amounted to less than a tenth of the population. Communist-led revolutions did *not* occur in any of the leading capitalist societies, as Marx had predicted, but only in collapsed empires (Russia, China, and briefly Hungary in 1919) and colonial peripheries (Vietnam, Cuba, etc.). The capitalist state has always proved itself adept at buying off or crushing urban workers movements. Communist governments took power not on the backs of the industrial working class, but as a result of coups by small groups of revolutionaries who gained power by appealing to non-proletarian groups, such as rural peasants. Marxists played no direct role in the revolution of February 1917 which toppled Tsarism. Lenin returned from exile and seized power in the name of the international proletariat eight months later. The October revolution "was not properly speaking a Bolshevik revolution, it was a Bolshevik insurrection amidst a radical popular revolution." (Priestland, p. 87) The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci described it as a "revolution against *Das Kapital*."⁵ From 1918 on, as a rule of thumb, socialists can be distinguished from communists in that they embraced democracy in their struggle to improve workers' lives, while communists did not. (Brown, p. 52) The Stalinist system that was erected in the 1930s deviated even further from what Marx had in mind. Writing shortly before his assassination by Stalin's agents in 1940, even Leon Trotsky admitted the possibility that

⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. Its Rise, Growth and Dissolution*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, "The revolution against 'Capital,'" in *Selections From the Political Writings 1919-20*, ed. by Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 34 ff.

“Stalinism was rooted not in the backwardness of the country but in the congenital incapability of the proletariat to become a ruling class.”⁶

The Chinese revolution of 1949 rendered obsolete Stalin’s “Socialism in one country” and established communism as a global phenomenon. But Mao Zedong’s long march to victory had taken him through the rural hinterland of China, untouched by industrial capitalism, and was fueled by nationalist antagonism towards the Japanese occupiers and China’s century of humiliation at the hand of Western powers. Nationalism was also the driving force behind the revolutions in Vietnam and Cuba. While Fidel Castro had read some Marx before the revolution, he only became a convinced communist after he had seized power in 1959, and realized that he needed Soviet aid to survive, especially in the face of U.S. hostility towards the new Cuban regime. (Service, pp. 342-46)

It may be fundamentally misleading to regard communism as a theory of proletarian revolution at all. In an important sense, the Great October Socialist Revolution never took place.⁷ It was imagined before the event in the dreams of revolutionaries, and then created after the event by Bolshevik propaganda – as in Sergei Eisenstein’s celebrated film, *October*, commissioned to mark the tenth anniversary of the revolution.

Communism is much more a tool of rule than an instrument for fomenting revolution: it is a formula which exploits what Lenin called a “revolutionary situation” to seize and consolidate state power. What happens after the revolution is much more important than what happened before: the real revolution is the one launched “from above.” None of the authors reviewed here explicitly make this argument, but it is compatible with their accounts of the history of communism. Strangely enough, it is also consistent with Marx’s intellectual approach, in that he believed the “economic base” of property relations determined the “superstructure” of political life: so the key development was the construction of a new economic system after the revolution, and not the toppling of a political regime per se.

The communist movement followed a rough chronological sequence through Kolakowski’s three phases, but the three dimensions overlapped and coexisted right through to the present day. So, for example, in contemporary China one can see at the same time New Left intellectuals in part inspired by the emancipatory rhetoric of the “young Marx;” striking workers battling long hours and low pay; and the official state apparatus which still insists on obligatory readings of the classic Marxist texts, and who claim legitimacy to rule in part on the basis of their grasp of the objective laws of history.

Kolakowski’s schema may however lead us to overlook the huge gulf between the second and third stages – between communism as a mass workers’ movement, and communism as a ruling party, fully in control of the state apparatus. Very quickly, sometimes within a matter of weeks, communism evolved from a philosophy of emancipation to a ruthless practice of oppression. How exactly do these two faces of communism relate to each

⁶ Cited in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast, Trotsky 1929-40* (London: Verso, 2003), 379.

⁷ An idea appropriated from Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), although Baudrillard probably believes that the October revolution did take place.

other? Are they logically and practically connected, or are they really two different phenomena, in mutual opposition? Karl Marx himself, drawing on the Hegelian dialectic, wanted to have it both ways. He wrote in 1843 that “material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”⁸ So ideas and power are mutually interchangeable drivers of history: ideas of liberation become concrete through the exercise of force.

All three books under review here to some degree cover the three phases identified by Kolakowski, but they devote the lion’s share of attention (more than 90 percent of the text) to communism as a ruling state ideology. The ideational and mass movement aspects of communism are passed over rather quickly. None of the authors seem particularly interested in Marxism as a philosophy of history. Does this reflect a disdain for metaphysical speculation? Or is it that the authors consider communism to be unintelligible, or useless, as a theory of history?

The economic foundation of communism also arguably gets less attention than it merits. Marxism was at its core an economic theory, a theory of capitalism. Marx and Engels had almost nothing to say about the final stage of communism, other than that it would be the antithesis of capitalism. It would have been interesting to hear the authors’ opinions about how capitalism has evolved. If communism is at its core the opposite of capitalism, then you can’t understand it without also having an account of how capitalist society changed over the course of the 20th century. The rise of social democracy, or the social market economy, in Europe and Japan after 1945 clearly undermined the communist world view. Had there been another Great Depression or a revival of fascism, the story could have been very different.

Like Marx, Vladimir Lenin also cut his theoretical teeth analyzing the dynamics and contradictions of capitalism. Students are often directed to read Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, the utopian pamphlet he wrote during a revolutionary lull in 1917. But that is a poor guide to what the Bolshevik party would actually do once it got into power. It is arguably more useful for them to read his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). That work sets up the crucial analytical framework of capitalism as a global system, correctly diagnosed as riven by contradictions, but incorrectly seen as doomed to collapse. It was that belief which inspired the Bolsheviks to seize power in Russia, a country on the periphery of the capitalist world system, and to hold on to it *no matter what the cost*. The Bolsheviks prevailed, in Brown’s words, because they had a “unifying idea” (p. 55) – a vision of a better future plus a theory of global transformation. (p. 113)

But it turned out that Lenin’s analysis was incorrect, and his vision a hallucination. Global capitalism did not disintegrate in the wake of the Great War; and the German workers’ revolution which the Bolsheviks anxiously anticipated in the early 1920s failed to materialize. In response to these failures, Stalin formulated the strategy of building “Socialism in one country” as the first stage in a protracted struggle to overthrow global capitalism. After his death, that morphed into the doctrine of peaceful coexistence – and

⁸ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 137.

ideological contestation – with the capitalist West that sustained the Soviet Union through the Cold War.

One enduring feature of communism is the central role it gives to political violence, both in theory and in practice. War is seen as inevitable – both war between states, and class war between progressive and reactionary social forces. Violence is needed to close the yawning gap between ideology and reality, between the promise of global liberation and the reality of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Lenin understood this, as did Stalin, and Mao. Probably the best known saying from Mao’s Little Red Book is that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”⁹ There are passing references to the work of Niccolo Machiavelli in Brown and Service, but no systematic engagement with the role of violence in the communist world view. Control over violence is central to the modern state, as explored by political theorists from Max Weber and Carl Schmitt to Michel Foucault. The field is wide open for someone to explain how the communist state’s embrace of mass violence relates to the contemporary Western debate on this subject.

Communism had a complex, love-hate relationship with capitalism. Communist thinkers morally condemned capitalism while intellectually accepting it as a necessary transitional stage in human evolution. It is still shocking to read Karl Marx’s 1853 article in which he welcomes British rule in India as a progressive force, shattering feudal traditions while building railways, creating markets, and knitting India into the global economy.¹⁰ This relates to the broader question of how one evaluates communism’s success in dealing with the challenge of modernization – the complex process that involves urbanization, industrialization, the retreat of religion, the spread of education and science, growing gender equality, improved life expectancy, and rising living standards. (Priestland directly addresses this topic, as indicated by his subtitle: *Communism and the Making of the Modern World*.)

In Russia and China, revolutionaries seized upon communism as a short-cut to modernity, one that would enable their benighted country to “catch up and surpass” the capitalist West. That spirit continued to inspire successive generations of Soviet leaders, from Khrushchev’s celebrated “kitchen debate” with Richard Nixon to Gorbachev’s launch of perestroika, which he believed would usher in a new, superior social model. But the modernity which communism was pursuing looked suspiciously like the urban consumer society that had been constructed in the advanced West. By the 1950s communist citizens could look forward to obtaining a family apartment, radio, TV, refrigerator, telephone, washing machine and – ultimately – an automobile. China’s Cultural Revolution was an exception, an insane attempt to resist this type of modernity – when owning a sofa, or drinking coffee, was condemned as a bourgeois deviation. (Service, pp. 336-7) The same

⁹ Cited in Brown, p. 148. Mao uttered the phrase in August 1927 – in the wake of the failed Communist Party uprising in Shanghai in April 1927 and the subsequent massacre of communists by their former ally the Kuomintang. Some 800 million copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* are thought to have been printed, making it the most widely distributed book in history after the Bible. *Business Week*, July 21, 2005.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “The British rule in India,” *New York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853.

pattern was repeated with even more devastating results by the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, when even wearing glasses could be a death sentence.

Clearly, most of the communist states were able to substantially transform their societies in the direction of modernity – with notable exceptions, such as Albania, Cambodia, and the Afro-Marxist states. Was this communist modernization roughly equivalent to capitalist modernization – or was it a costly and counter-productive detour from the main historical path? Merely building factories and filling them with peasants did not automatically produce a working class.¹¹ And could you have a modern society without a class of entrepreneurs – or a middle class? This question acquired contemporary relevance once the socialist states started introducing market economies in the 1980s. Was communist modernization a help or a hindrance to subsequent capitalist development? Soviet industrialization produced an educated urban workforce and a usable infrastructure of railways and pipelines. But it also left a legacy of worthless heavy industrial plants, ill-located cities, environmental degradation, an atrophied civil society, and a corrosive culture of corruption. The balance sheet of achievements of Maoist modernization is even more modest. Perhaps it is inappropriate to expect historical accounts to yield such “lessons” for the present. But given that communism was itself based on the claim that it was the certain path to a better future, these are important questions to ask about the communist experiment. The realization that communist modernization wasn’t working was a crucial factor leading Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev to embrace radical reforms in the 1980s. And still as of 2010 “modernization” is the central slogan of President Dmitrii Medvedev.

Writing the history of communism

The volumes reviewed here represent the first draft of history from the pens of a troika of seasoned British scholars, all coincidentally based at St. Anthony’s College, Oxford. All three are scholars of the Soviet Union: Brown entered academia in the 1960s, Service in the 1970s, and Priestland in the 1980s. Service and Priestland are historians, Brown a political scientist. Though there are interesting differences of style and emphasis between the three, they all tend to concentrate on the historical narrative of major political events, and accord pride of place in their analysis to the Soviet state. It was after all the Bolshevik Revolution which brought Marxism off the streets and into the corridors of power, and it was the collapse of the Soviet Union that signaled the end of communism. None of the authors are sympathetic to the Marxist project. Brown and Priestland adopt a fairly neutral tone, looking back at communism more in puzzlement than in anger. Service on the other hand is willing to use the Totalitarian label, and to work up more of an ideological head of steam about the crimes of communism.

The historical accounts of the three authors follow broadly similar paths. A brief summary of Karl Marx’s theory is followed by a more detailed account of the Russian revolution, and the seepage of communist ideas into the colonial world. The rise of Stalin segues into a discussion of the delayed and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to construct

¹¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

popular fronts against fascism, followed by the shattering test of World War Two. Communism is an international movement, one which Stalin tries – and ultimately fails – to make synonymous with loyalty to the Soviet state. Then came the spread of communism to Eastern Europe on the bayonets of the Red Army, Tito’s defiance of Stalin, the Chinese revolution, and the Korean War. Communist ideas were quite popular amongst West European industrial workers in the 1920s-40s, but fascism and then the Cold War kept those parties from power.¹² The death of Stalin led to a renewal of fissiparous trends in the international movement, from the Hungarian uprising of 1956 to the Sino-Soviet split. But Marxist parties fought their way into power in Vietnam and Cuba, and made their presence felt in other flash points of the Third World. In the 1980s the focus returns to Europe, with the rise of Solidarity in Poland and the Soviet endgame.

The authors gamely outline the big picture while also doing justice to the multiple eddies and side-currents of communism. This means that the books cumulate to some 2,000 pages, testing the reader with their massive cast of characters and encyclopedic detail. Admittedly, much of that detail is intriguing. Vladimir Lenin, living in Parisian exile, had his bicycle stolen from outside the Bibliothèque Nationale. (Service, p. 53) Friedrich Engels’ hobby was foxhunting; the Frenchman who invented the term “communism,” Étienne Cabet, moved to America; and the NY Giants baseball team offered Fidel Castro a contract. (Brown, pp. 19, 17, 295) Che Guevara had a job selling church souvenirs to pilgrims in Guatemala City in 1954; and the signal for the launch of Portugal’s “carnation revolution” in 1974 was the broadcasting of the Portugese entry in the Eurovision song contest. (Priestland, pp. 370, 476). Hu Jintao’s 2005 rectification campaign had to insist on hand-written reports because too many comrades were downloading their self-criticisms from the web. (Priestland, p. 562)

There is much to learn from these volumes, both for veterans of the Cold War and for students who were born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. When communism was still a going concern, there was less interest in looking at the overall phenomenon, and more incentive to study the complexities of individual cases; such as the differences between the Soviet and Chinese models, or the extent to which the post-1953 Soviet Union was structurally distinct from the Stalinist model. With the system’s demise, however, it is time to look back and take stock. And there is certainly a need for a book to recommend to a student who asks “So, what was the deal with Communism?”

There have been relatively few efforts to write synoptic histories of communism in recent years. In 2003 Richard Pipes published his short but spirited *Communism: A History*.¹³ 1999 saw the American publication of *The Black Book of Communism*, a collaborative project of French intellectuals which documented the pathology of communist regimes.¹⁴ Both Pipes and *The Black Book* achieved focus and vigor by presenting the reader with a

¹² In free elections in 1946-48 communist parties won 28.6 percent of the vote in France, 19 percent in Italy and 37.9 percent in Czechoslovakia.

¹³ Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

¹⁴ Mark Kramer, Jonathan Murphy, Stephane Courtois, and Jean-Louis Panne, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1999).

single interpretation of communism as a pernicious ideology.¹⁵ The books reviewed here strike a more objective and balanced tone, and they do not come down in favor of a single line of argument to explain the rise and fall of communism.

Romantic rebels

Of the three authors reviewed here, David Priestland is the most willing to engage with the emancipatory potential of communism. He starts off by drawing the parallel with the legend of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods, noting that communism's faith in the power of technological change was an important part of its appeal.¹⁶ However, as shown by the French experience after 1789, a vast gulf quickly opened up between radical popular demands and the exigencies of a revolutionary state. Priestland portrays communism as torn between competing claims of rationality and rebellion; hierarchy and equality; Romanticism and modernism – just as the French Revolution promised *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, but could not deliver all three in equal measure. (Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness turn out to be more realistic and harmonious goals for the revolutionaries on this side of the Atlantic.)

Priestland provides a lively account, toggling between structural analysis, historical narrative, and telling detail, often through an artistic lens. The book is packed with references to poems, statues, paintings, and other cultural representations. It was intriguing to learn that Tatlin's tower, an avant-garde fantasy of 1920, was designed to hold the various branches of government for the Third International, which would rotate at different speeds. (p. 101) He explains Che Guevara's enduring appeal as a cult icon – now immortalized in a Youtube anthem.¹⁷ He shapes the story into 12 distinct chapters, with pithy titles like “Men of steel” (the rise of Stalinism), “Parricide” (destalinization), and “High tide” (the spread of Soviet influence in the Third World in the 1970s).¹⁸

Priestland manages to convey some sense of the appeal of Marxism to the masses downtrodden by poverty and oppression. He cites a Malaysian communist describing how he felt “as if I climbed on the back of a tiger” when he was admitted to the Communist Party. (p. 265) For successive generations of discontented youth, it was something akin to joining a street gang or a religious cult: a way of gaining access to esoteric knowledge, the keys to understanding history. One complication from the very beginning was that Communist parties tended to have very bad relations with other left wing movements – their rivals for the loyalty of the working class. This meant that the creation of an international network of Communist Parties loyal to the Soviet Union in

¹⁵ There is now an online Global Museum of Communism, which opened in June 2009:

<http://www.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/>; <http://www.victimsofcommunism.org/gmoc.php>

¹⁶ Priestland later notes that Alvin Toffler's futurological tract *The Third Wave* (New York: Pan Books, 1981) was a bestseller in China in the 1980s. (p. 507)

¹⁷ Priestland, p. 402. Nathalie Cardone, “Comandante Che Guevara: Hasta Siempre,”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSRVtITwFs8>

¹⁸ Brown and Service have 30 and 40 chapters respectively. Priestland's book includes impressive color illustrations: photos and political posters. Service has color reproductions of posters, Brown has black and white photos of individuals.

the 1920s was no mean feat – although it did open the door to fascism. (p. 124) Priestland discusses the 1947 book *I Chose Freedom*, an exposé of the 1930s famine by Viktor Kravchenko, the most senior defector during the Stalin era. Kravchenko was vilified by the French Communist Party, a galling illustration of the loyalty of the international communist movement to Stalin at that time. (p. 293) Disillusion set in after the revelations of Stalin's crimes and the 1956 invasion of Hungary, but it was a slow process that culminated in the emergence of Eurocommunist parties in Spain and Italy in the 1970s – embracing democracy as a necessary part of a socialist society.

As with capitalism, so also there was a complex interdependence between communism and nationalism. At a theoretical level, communists promised to transcend nationalism; at a practical level, they were competing with nationalists for popular support. The Hungarian communists used nationalism to come to power in 1919, playing on the sense of outrage at the Treaty of Trianon (p. 71), while Stalin was a Georgian nationalist before he was a Marxist. (p. 138) Mao Zedong's first published article complained that "our nation is wanting in strength." (p. 251) The opening words of Mao's address proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 were "The Chinese people have stood up." Stalin himself turned to overt Russian nationalism when his back was against the wall in 1941. An interesting touch is that he addressed the Soviet people as "brothers and sisters" in his speech immediately after the German invasion. (p. 206) Communist leaders could tap into nationalism to build domestic support, but this could backfire in the context of the international communist movement. It was nationalism rather than any doctrinal differences that lay behind Tito's split with Stalin, and the Hungarian uprising of 1956 – which, Priestland notes, was the last 19th century Romantic revolution in Europe: one where the rebels take to the streets guns in hand and storm the prisons to free the jailed.

Soviet advances in science and industry were immensely attractive to leaders and publics in the developing world. Nikolai Ostrovsky's socialist realist epic *How the Steel Was Tempered* was a best-seller in China in the 1950s. (p. 300) But behind the propaganda of success, the economic core of the Stalinist paradigm was pumping resources out of the peasantry, what the Marxists call "primitive accumulation." (It was Deng Xiaoping's decision to reverse this approach, freeing the peasants to enrich themselves, which lay behind the success of China's economic reforms in the 1980s.) Soviet Modernism got something of a second wind in the late 1950s with the success of the Sputnik launch and Khrushchev's commitment to consumerism.¹⁹ Priestland archly describes Khrushchev as more Father Christmas than Moses. (p. 350) The Cuban revolution came along at the same time, and restored a little zest to the Soviet revolutionary project. But the aspirations of Soviet consumers and Cuban revolutionaries would not be realized: a point that becomes clear as Priestland takes us through some of the nether reaches of world communism, such as the Afro-Marxist regimes that came to power in Mozambique and Ethiopia in the 1970s. (pp. 477-86) Priestland spends little time on the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, though this was arguably a crucial turning point, discrediting the Soviet Union in the eyes of the Third World and setting in train the process of events that would lead to the Soviet collapse.

¹⁹ One breathtaking example of Khrushchev-era optimism is Dmitrii Shostakovich's operetta about a new apartment bloc in Moscow, *Cheremushki*, which was released as a movie in 1962.

Priestland's account of the post-1980 devolution of communism is compressed into a rather hurried 75 pages (pp. 500-75) He does not consider alternate explanations for the Soviet collapse, though he does convey a sense of the cultural and ideological exhaustion of late communism. He credits Ronald Reagan and Milton Friedman for reviving the *idealism* of capitalism, throwing down the ideological gauntlet to a Soviet leadership too geriatric to pick it up. (ch. 12/V) In this perspective, Gorbachev is billed as the last Romantic communist, turning his back on the pragmatism of power in favor of a better future based on consent, not force. By the 1990s, in the wake of communism's collapse, the state had come to be widely seen as an enemy of freedom, and believers in Romantic progress saw capitalism as their best hope, as evidenced by the lionization of figures like Sergei Brin and Bill Gates (even in China).

A web of revolutionaries

Robert Service, a distinguished historian of Soviet communism, ranges far and wide in this encyclopedic history of the international communist movement. Service has a breezy, no-nonsense style with short, pithy sentences. His account weaves together major affairs of state, ideological battles, and the evolution of party politics. One comes away with a sense of communism as an international web of revolutionary activists and party leaders, cooperating, colluding, and clashing over the decades. Ideas become associated with certain individuals, and become embedded in certain types of party structures. Communism really was the ultimate international network, one that came into existence long before "network analysis" had become one of the standard tools of social analysis, and before Al Qaeda had introduced the concept to scholars of international relations.²⁰

A key role in this web of connections was played by intellectuals, including authors of fiction and non-fiction, both pro and anti-communist. Service gives us a broad overview of the main players, from George Bernard Shaw to Herbert Marcuse, but also lesser known figures such as the children's writers Arthur Ransome and Richmal Crompton.

Service (like Brown) starts off by drawing some parallels between the utopian appeals of the nascent communist movement and early Christianity. The religious theme resurfaces later on, with Service characterizing communism as a political substitute for religion – hence its emphasis on orthodoxy (p. 37), and arguing that it has much more to do with religion than with science (p. 66) The fast-paced narrative does not leave much room for discussion of what types of people became Comrades, and why – either in terms of their psychological profile or their social origins. The thorny relationship between Marxism and nationalism repeatedly crops up, though nationalism is generally seen as a disruptive complication, or as a tool that can be picked up by endangered elites – as in the comment that "some communist leaders darted down the nationalism foxhole." (p. 477) Scholars of communism, and liberal academics more generally, have always been extremely reluctant

²⁰ For a fascinating analysis of the intimate ties between Russian and Chinese revolutionaries see Elizabeth Macguire, "The Sino-Soviet romance: How Chinese Communists fell in love with Russia, Russians, and the Russian Revolution," (Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, doctoral dissertation, 2010).

to attribute independent causal power to nationalism. The collapse of communism does not (yet) seem to have changed this state of affairs.

Service notes that the basic institutions of communist power were created very quickly between 1918 and 1923 (ch. 6), and have been remarkably similar in any of the countries where Marxist parties took power. (p. 9) Still, it remains something of a puzzle: why did this extremely radical and unproven theory achieve such rapid prominence, and become the basis for states that at their peak ruled one third of the world's population? How in 1917 could a group of a few thousand communists take over a country of 120 million people? (p. 99) Service downplays the anti-colonial appeal of Marxist theory and does not spend that much time on the spread of communism to China. (pp. 115-18) He is however insightful on the political evolution of communist parties in France and Italy. Service covers the entire post-1980 exit from communism in a brisk 57 pages. (pp. 415-72)

Service spent a year at the Hoover Institution while working on the book and he incorporates some material from their archives, including aspects of British and American communism. There are some British cultural references that might throw off American readers – for example, the popularity of the comedian Norman Wisdom in Albania. (p. 359) And does British Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt really deserve nine citations, while Che Guevara has only six?

According to Service, Khrushchev banged his shoe on the desk during a speech at the United Nations by Harold Macmillan, who “courteously asked for a translation.” (p. 368) However, the source which Service cites reports that the shoe was deployed during a speech by a Filipino delegate who was criticizing the Soviet occupation of East Europe. (p. 368)²¹ The book could have been more tightly edited: for example, Malaysia was not a Dutch colony (p. 368); *Dr. Strangelove* involved the launching of bombers, not rockets (p. 370); and there is no Berkeley University (p. 372). Leon Trotsky is referred to throughout as Trotski, although Service's own *Trotsky: A Biography*, issued in 2009 by the same publisher (Harvard University Press), uses the conventional “Trotsky” spelling.

The shaky pyramid of power

Archie Brown's book is a thorough and assured guide to the arc of communist history. He moves quickly through the pre-Soviet phase: already by page 40 we are on to the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905. In Chapter 6 Brown provides a model of “what was communism” focusing on the institutionalization of power in the hands of a ruling party. His list of features comprises: single-party rule, centralization of power within the party; non-capitalist ownership of the economy, which is subject to political commands rather

²¹ Service cites William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 476. Taubman includes the fascinating detail that Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko sheepishly took off his own shoe and started tapping it in solidarity with his leader. It is not clear whether Khrushchev actually banged his shoe or merely brandished it.

than market forces; the ideological goal of building communism; and a sense of being part of an international movement.²²

Brown avoids the controversies over interpreting Stalinism that have engaged historians for many years, merely noting that Soviet industrialization did produce some relative winners, for example through the promotion of a new educated layer of officials. (p. 66) The status of women also underwent a transformation (one of the few references to gender in these works). (p. 68) As the scene shifts to the post-war takeovers in East Europe and Stalin's struggle to contain incipient pluralism, represented above all by Tito, Brown focuses on decision making at the top echelons of power. Interestingly, he sees the Soviet Union's failure to negotiate the unification of a neutral Germany in 1955, prior to West Germany joining NATO, as a major missed opportunity, which could have defused the Cold War and perhaps set history on a different course. Brown downplays Afro-Marxism, seeing it as a ploy by African leaders to get Soviet aid. (p. 364-7) Brown's narrative is intricate, showing his mastery of the material. But readers might not have that much enthusiasm for details such as voting blocs in the 1957 Politburo (p. 245) or the twists and turns of the Nina Andreeva affair in 1987, when party conservatives tried to push back against Gorbachev's reforms. (pp. 504-6).

Looking at the Communist bloc of 16 states at its peak, circa 1980, Brown concludes that its dominant characteristic was its diversity beneath an appearance of uniformity. While there were some common features, the differences among the various national brands of communism were often overlooked. (It took ten years for the U.S. leadership to realize that the Sino-Soviet split was for real.) Brown takes the argument one step further, and suggests that this incipient pluralism was what led to the decline and fall of communism. Brown devotes 30 pages to a detailed account of the Prague Spring (pp 368-97), while the following chapter on the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev era merits only 20 pages. (pp. 398-417) The Czech experiment is crucial for Brown because it shows that reform communism was possible, with Alexander Dubcek a communist idealist seeking "socialism with a human face." (p. 387) This sets the stage for the main protagonist in the communist endgame, Mikhail Gorbachev, who Brown implies was trying to realize in Moscow what Dubcek failed to accomplish in Prague. (pp. 593, 615)

Most of Brown's chapter on the Solidarity workers' movement (ch. 21) is devoted to the decision to impose martial law in December 1981 by Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski. Wilfried Loth has argued that Yuri Andropov's decision not to authorize a Soviet invasion of Poland in 1981 was the crucial turning point in Soviet relations with East Europe.²³ Gorbachev's explicit renunciation of the use of force in 1988 could be seen as merely the continuation of Andropov's policy. Brown does not make this argument, and he might not agree with it, but it is consistent with his analysis.

²² This list is quite similar to the features enumerated in the Totalitarianism paradigm, though the latter included a tendency towards one-man rule, mass terror, and an aggressive foreign policy. Abbott Gleason *Totalitarianism: The Inner History Of The Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²³ Wilfried Loth, "The Cold War," in *Perforating the Iron Curtain*, ed. Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 18-34, 28.

For Brown, the demise of communism is undisputedly a top-down process. He writes: “As in the Soviet Union in the quarter century after the fall of Khrushchev, or (still more) in Czechoslovakia between 1963 and the spring of 1968, or in Hungary under Kadar, the most important source of change has been the evolution of thinking of people within the official structures.” (p. 450) Yes, in a highly centralized, authoritarian system, changes in leadership can produce radical destabilizing effects. But what causes those leaders’ thoughts to evolve? Surely they are responding to changes in the domestic and international environment.

Clearly, Gorbachev’s sense that the Soviet model had reached a dead end, and his determination to force through reform, is what brought down the communist state system in Europe. As Brown notes, all the crucial democratic breakthroughs that Russia experienced – a free press, competitive elections, the formation of political parties – took place on Gorbachev’s watch, *before* Boris Yeltsin came to power. Gorbachev also made the key decision in 1988 not to allow the use of force in East Europe (p. 524), based partly on the mistaken belief that the region’s leaders would introduce perestroika and stay voluntarily as members of the Soviet bloc (p. 527) Gorbachev also refused to authorize the use of mass repression inside the USSR – with the exception of the occupation of Baku in January 1990.²⁴ (p. 559) But why exactly did Gorbachev conclude that the system needed radical reform in the first place – and why did he believe that it *could* be radically reformed, while preserving its essential character?²⁵ Throughout, it was Gorbachev’s intention to save the Soviet Union, not to destroy it. At the end Gorbachev still saw himself as a Leninist, although Brown argues that in reality he was not. (p. 596) Especially given the complex, contradictory and evolving nature of Gorbachev’s thinking, surely more credit needs to be given to the external pressures that were forcing Gorbachev to act.

Brown’s top-down approach tends to downplay the role of mass resistance – from the mujahedin in Afghanistan to the striking workers in Poland. He writes “There was however no causal link between the political achievement of Solidarity at the beginning of the 1980s and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe at the end of that decade.” (p. 437) Here Brown overstates his case. The determined challenge by the Polish workers surely substantially increased the pressure on the leaders in Moscow and every other communist capital. Brown himself subsequently refers to Deng Xiaoping’s “recurrent Polish nightmare.”(p. 447). Solidarity also emboldened the newly-elected President Ronald Reagan to ramp up military spending and launch a political crusade against communism. The labor unrest wrecked the Polish economy and increased the financial burdens on the Kremlin. Finally, Solidarity launched a new wave of strikes in 1988, and it was this which triggered the system’s death spiral. Yes, it is impossible to imagine the

²⁴ Brown does not mention the December 1988 arrest of the Karabakh Committee, the leaders of Armenia’s democratic/nationalist movement.

²⁵ Brown makes clear that Gorbachev was influenced by an inner circle of liberal advisors, notably Aleksander Yakovlev and Georgi Arbatov. But the question remains: why did he listen to them, and what was influencing *their* thinking?

Soviet Union collapsing the way it did with Gorbachev. But would it have happened without Solidarity?

A similar argument can be made with regard to the nationalist movements that convulsed several corners of the Soviet Union from 1988 on. Brown portrays nationalism in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia as a *consequence* of a social system in crisis, rather than a cause. (p. 588) It is true that the unrest only took off *after* Gorbachev had started easing the political reins, but that does not mean it has no independent causal significance. During that brief but intense period between 1988 and 1991 the nationalist protests played a pivotal role in derailing Gorbachev's reform agenda and shattering the Soviet state of which he was the head.²⁶ The nationalist mobilization hijacked his partial democratization and doomed his plans for economic reform. In August 1990 Gorbachev pulled the plug on the 500 days plan, the last, slim chance to introduce a gradualist market reform, because it threatened the unity of the USSR – in that it would have put decision-making in the hands of the union republic leaders. (p. 557) Some credit should also be given to the Soviet miners who took to the streets to protest poor living conditions in the summer of 1989; and to the citizens who flocked to defend the White House during the August 1991 coup – and the rank and file officers and soldiers who refused to fire on them. Sometimes in history the pawns do get to checkmate the king.

In the case of Yugoslavia, the causal role of nationalism is even clearer. Contrary to the widespread view, shared by Brown, it was not Slobodan Milosevic who was the first to play the nationalist card (p. 547). Rather, he was one of the last defenders of Yugoslavism (a Yugoslavia that benefited Serbs, of course). It was Slovenia and Croatia that opened the nationalist door with their refusal to agree a common budget and subsequent declarations of independence. Brown is not alone in downplaying the role of nationalism – neither Priestland nor Service accord it any particular prominence in either the rise or the decline of communism.

Conclusion

Communism began as a systematic set of ideas, so it is Exhibit A for the importance of studying ideas in the shaping of history. However, the history of communism is above all a story of unintended consequences – of ideas that backfired when there was an effort to put them into practice. The Soviet Union was born out of two flawed theories – the conviction of Marx (and later Lenin) that international capitalism was about to collapse; and Lenin's belief that the party could represent the interests of the proletariat. The Soviet Union died as a consequence of two more flawed theories – Gorbachev's conviction that the system's life could be prolonged by reform; and Reagan's willingness to negotiate arms control with Gorbachev on the assumption that the Strategic Defense Initiative would mean an end to mutually-assured destruction.

²⁶ The first nationalist unrest under Gorbachev came in December 1986, when Kazakhs protested the replacement of their Communist Party First Secretary with a Russian from outside Kazakhstan. Brown, p. 558.

The idea of communism appeared to turn into reality with the October Revolution – the Word became flesh, as it were. However, international communism was not synonymous with the Soviet state, especially after 1945, as a number of communist leaders in distant lands were able to pull away from Soviet control. At the same time, the United States entered the picture as a systemic adversary for international communism. From that point on, the communism narrative becomes merged with the general history of the Cold War. After 1945 Soviet behavior, already predicated on encirclement by hostile capitalist powers, was increasingly shaped by the actions (and anticipated reactions) of its international adversaries. This raises the general question of how conceptually to unscramble the story of communism from the story of the Cold War – or whether it even makes sense to try. This reflects the old and unresolved debate about whether Soviet leaders' behavior reflected communist ideology or Russia's geopolitical interests.

The Cold War was a competition between two different models of how humanity should organize itself, at the level of the domestic socio-economic system and the global political order. The borders between the domestic and international systems were highly porous – think for example of the impact of the Suez crisis on Khrushchev's decision to intervene in Hungary in October 1956. Maybe a true history of communism can only be written if it also incorporates a history of the non-communist world – the unexpected survival and eventual break-up of Europe's colonial empires; the rise of the United States; and the emergence of the European Union. But then, the books would have to be even longer.

In general the Left has shown little interest in drawing lessons from the collapse of Soviet Union and China's embrace of capitalism.²⁷ There are still some true believers out there, such as Tariq Ali, an Anglo-Pakistani Marxist who published a defense of Marxism in 2010. Ali argues that it was Stalinism not communism that failed, and that capitalism continues to fail.²⁸ Marxists drew some *schadenfreude* from the global financial crisis of 2008 – though even they could not pretend that it was the apocalyptic “final crisis.” One response among leftist intellectuals has been to retreat into deconstruction and postmodernism, which involves a refusal to subject their ideas to empirical testing (the sin of “positivism”). The turn towards a socio-linguistic approach has produced some interesting work on what socialism was like for the people who lived through it, most notably Alexander Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.²⁹ But Yurchak's ethnography is based on a very small sample of Soviet citizens, and is not convincingly embedded in a broader theory of the dynamics of Soviet socialism. In Russia itself the predominant attitude towards the Soviet past is one of nostalgia: a yearning for a past that is now irretrievably lost (and that may have never existed in the first place).³⁰

²⁷ Jean Francois Revel, *Last Exit to Utopia: The Survival of Socialism in a Post-Soviet Era* (Encounter Books, 2009)

²⁸ Tariq Ali, *The Idea of Communism* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).

²⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

What comes next, after the end of communism? The collapse of the Soviet Union and Beijing's embrace of the market signaled the end of communism as an alternative to capitalism. In Eastern Europe, communist parties renamed themselves, shelved their millenarian rhetoric, and donned business suits. Elsewhere in the world, only a small number of rogue rulers are prepared to directly challenge the idea that the market is the most efficient generator of wealth, or that democracy is the best form of rule. In general, ordinary citizens are suspicious of all political leaders, whatever ideology they proclaim. In both new and established democracies, political parties are losing members and voters. In a curious twist to Friedrich Engels's vision, the rule of people has indeed been replaced by the administration of things – but according to capitalist, not communist, principles.

Resistance to the pernicious effects of capitalist globalization lives on in various forms, from radical Islam to anti-globalization protesters. But those movements are far removed from the spirit of Soviet communism, and their intellectual heroes are pale shadows of their Marxist forebears.³¹ Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is probably the closest thing to a Marxist standard bearer one can find in the contemporary world, but his “Bolivarian socialism” is a shoddy concoction of anti-Americanism and Latin American populism, kept afloat by Venezuela's oil revenues and El Presidente's gift of the gab.

It is also worth remembering that although the obituaries have been written, communism itself is not quite dead, not just yet. In May 2010, as this essay was being written, a single day's newspaper carried reports about the Communist Party winning 11 percent of the vote in free elections in the Czech Republic; a Dutch woman who volunteered to join the FARC Marxist guerrillas in Colombia, and a train derailed by Naxalite Maoists in India.³² Not to forget of course the elephant in the room: the Communist Party of China, with its 76 million members, that continues to rule the world's largest country and second-largest economy. It is an open question whether Beijing's hybrid of Communist political controls and a market economy will prove capable of reproducing itself for another generation. If not, then the species of communism can truly be declared to be extinct.

³¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

³² *New York Times*, May 28, 2010.