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# Introduction

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Few countries have had as dramatic a history as Russia's in the twentieth century. The country as such disappeared for some seven decades during the Soviet period, only to re-emerge at the end of the century. For seventy-four years from 1917 the country was ruled by a party that claimed to be building some version of communism. This book is an essay on the experience of communism in those years. It is not a history of Russia over the last century, and neither is it a full-scale analysis of communism. The aim of the work is to examine the origins of the communist idea in Russian political thought and practice, the various forms that revolutionary socialism took in the pre-revolutionary period, and the resistance to these ideas. The nature of the revolutionary socialist challenge will be discussed, together with an examination of why a particularly virulent form came to power in Russia in 1917. The debates within the new communist regime will then be analysed, together with the failure of the alternatives to Leninist closure. The experience of the revolutionary society will be revealed in the light of various theories of Stalinism and totalitarianism. The traumatic aftershocks following the period of high totalitarianism gradually gave way from the 1950s to the decline of regime viability. Perestroika (restructuring) under Mikhail Gorbachev between 1985 and 1991 succeeded in reviving the political order but the country soon lost its recognisably communist features, while the state in which communism had taken hold disintegrated. The final chapter will seek to place the communist experience in a broader historical perspective.

The focus is on the 'short' twentieth century, from 1914 (or 1917) to 1989 (or 1991), but this has to be seen in the context of what might be called the 'long' twentieth century, encompassing the Marxist revolutionary challenge to capitalism from some time in

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the 1840s, the emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861 and the epochal consequences of Russia's incomplete character as a nation state and modern polity, the belated industrial revolution in Russia from the late nineteenth century, and the onset of a modernity that simultaneously saw the dissolution of old bonds of order while establishing new forms of social integration. The long twentieth century, moreover, was a century of war and revolution. The modern era of conflict began in certain respects with the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, which set in motion a chain reaction of European 'civil wars', taking on a global character, that was only exhausted in 1945. Interstate war was accompanied by an internal 'cold war' of class conflict within societies, announced in *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. This burst out into an armed 'hot' war in the Paris Commune of 1871, whose model of societal self-organisation was eulogised by Karl Marx in his *The Civil War in France*. In the Commune workers assumed the management of the city and developed new forms of popular administration and accountability. The text influenced Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's thinking, notably in his *The State and Revolution* of 1917, on the possibility of the working class taking over the management of the common affairs of society. In power, however, the communist ideal of social self-management turned into a severely statist and heavily bureaucratised system, characterised by high levels of coercion. The communist revolution, both in anticipation and in practice, died of exhaustion in 1989–91, and thus it was indeed at this time that both the long and the short twentieth centuries ended. The communist collapse was accompanied by the accidental disintegration of the country that it had established, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). What comes after, and Russia's place in it, is still not clear.

This study is concerned with a number of key themes. The first focuses on the fundamental question: why Russia? Revolutionary socialism was born in western Europe, yet it entered social consciousness in Russia in a far more profound way than in any other country. Numerous contingent factors, together with objective processes, can help explain the communist seizure of power in 1917; but the preconditions for the ability of small group of revolutionaries, in the form of Lenin's Bolshevik party, to take control of the world's largest country remain a mystery. For some the answer lies in Russia's innate authoritarianism, with the

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autocracy of the tsars replaced by a communist despotism. For others the answer lies at a more spiritual level: Russia's inability to accommodate itself to the strictures of a 'bourgeois' social existence and its endless striving for some sort of transcendence of historical and social reality. A view prevalent in post-communist Russia blames the west for having pushed the country to launch a military offensive on the eastern front in spring 1917, following the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II in February but before the new authorities in the Provisional Government could consolidate their power, and thus a power vacuum was created into which the Bolsheviks boldly stepped.

The religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev argued that communism was a new form of Russia's traditionally messianic character. At an abstract level there may be some truth to such a characterisation, but in the event Soviet communism destroyed the foundation of traditional Russian eschatology, the Russian Orthodox Church and its social basis in the peasantry, and communist messianism, with its vision of a world revolution as extolled by leaders such as Leon Trotsky, saw Russia as little more than a dispensable platform from which to transform the world. In practice 'communism in Russia' became a *sui generis* type of 'Russian communism', not so much *merging* with Russian traditions to create a syncretic social order as *interacting* with Russian realities while retaining its organisational and ideological identity; while 'Russia' in the abstract retained its own identity. The two strands remained separate, but endlessly interwoven in complex patterns, and that is why ultimately no sustainable new *Soviet* synthesis emerged. By the end of perestroika a powerful sub-strand of Russian national self-assertion, whose symbolic leader was Boris Yeltsin, radically diverged from the communist thread and in the end became the dominant one, and the anti-communist movement took control of the fate of contemporary Russia, although with many a wistful glance backwards.

A second theme is the profound *resistance* to revolutionary and communist ideas from the very earliest period. Nikolai Gogol's early radicalism gave way to a profound conservatism, Mikhail Dostoevsky criticised the revolutionary idea in his *The Devils*, and many an early Marxist, like Peter Struve, later repudiated the very idea of revolution. Above all, the *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) collection of 1909 still represents perhaps the most powerful and moving

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critique of revolutionary socialist ideas ever penned. The volume brought together some of Russia's leading intellectuals, who asked why the idea of revolution had become so attractive to so much of Russia's intelligentsia. The resistance continued even within the communist movement, with the radical socialists Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg criticising Lenin's conception of Bolshevik power, together with numerous critical movements within the Bolshevik party itself, notably the Democratic Centralists in 1919–20. Criticism and resistance continued, although mostly in subterranean forms or in exile, notably in Victor Kravchenko's moving testimony *I Chose Freedom* [96]. Resistance took the form of organised dissent during the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev (1964–82), and then became a flood during perestroika, helping to bring down the regime. In other words, any account that seeks to portray Russian communism as a new form of traditional Russian authoritarianism needs to explain the high level of intellectual and practical resistance to maximalist communist idealism in the country.

The Russian revolution (already critiqued by the *Vekhi* group in 1909) was a broad movement but in late 1917 it was hijacked by a small group of extremists led by Lenin in the Bolshevik party, who then proceeded to destroy not only the 'bourgeois' social order and its nascent institutions in Russia, such as the rule of law and an independent public sphere, but also the emancipatory ideals of 'the Russian revolution' writ large, a movement that since 1825 had been struggling for constitutionalism, civic inclusion and spiritual revival, as Leo Tolstoy argued so movingly in his book *The Meaning of the Russian Revolution*. The Leninist conjuncture also undermined the possibility of a socialist public sphere, civil society and polity, populated by worker organisations, co-operatives, self-managing communes and peasant communities, new forms of social living and gender relations, and managed by self-governing soviets (councils), all of which proliferated from 1917. Instead a grey, bureaucratised, intensely coercive and highly centralised social order was imposed, which became increasingly socially conservative and ultimately completely dysfunctional. In short, the Russian revolution carried within it diverse aspirations and hopes for new forms of freedom, but in the event the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was as much a coup *against* the Russian revolution as its fulfilment.

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The third issue is a more institutional one and deals with the nature of the communism that ruled over Russia for seventy-four years. In his comprehensive study of the rise and fall of the sixteen communist systems that came to power in the twentieth century, Archie Brown [20] defines communism as a power monopoly by a centralised party, the predominance of non-market relations in the economy, and an ideological commitment to the global achievement of the movement's utopian goals of creating a non-capitalist social order. These three elements lie at the heart of communism in Russia, and combined to create a centralised power system ruling over the polity and economy while proclaiming its commitment to the spread of the revolution. In very few systems, Brown notes, did the assumption of power by the communist movement actually allow popular control and the reduction of alienation. Instead, bureaucratic systems became entrenched and self-serving elites consolidated into what Milovan Djilas later called a 'new class' [38]. From the very first days of Bolshevik power the problem of the state in a socialist system was raised, together with the possibility of an alternative to the statism typical of 'actually existing socialism'. Why did the state substitute itself so intensely for civil society in this system, despite Marx's aspirations, voiced so forcefully in his *The Civil War in France*, that under socialism the people would transcend the division between state and society?

Marx had never given any details about how the state would 'wither away' under communism, and, indeed, his emphasis on economic centralisation inevitably entailed an enhanced role for the central bureaucracy. Instead, the political state was abolished; that is, the whole panoply of independent law, individual rights, and traditional forms of representation and accountability that had developed over the course of centuries in the west. At the same time, Leninist organisational principles, and in particular the effective fusion of the communist party with the state, stifled the space for any autonomous role for social movements or workers' organisations. As a result the Soviet state was imbued with a monolithic and hierarchical character accompanied by only the most rudimentary and instrumental forms of mass democracy. The lack of independent economic relations and the absence of a structured and autonomous role for law deprived autonomous activity of any systematic framework. The new power monopoly was most apparent in respect of relations between the state and society,

but it also applied to the internal operation of Soviet-type systems, however much in practice their institutions were fragmentary and confused.

The great paradox of communist systems was indeed the monolithic power exercised over society accompanied by almost permanent internal chaos and factionalism dominated by personalised dictatorship. The capricious and malevolent leadership of Joseph Stalin from the 1920s to his death in 1953 was replicated in most other communist systems. A social order predicated on the working out of impersonal class and productive forces turned out to mimic the forms of rule of archaic despotisms, although wreathed in the rhetoric of class emancipation and communist party rule. Thus Nikolai Bukharin, one of the original Bolsheviks, aptly observed that Stalin was ‘Genghiz Khan with a telephone’; backed up, we may observe, with progressive forms of legitimation and implemented through the services of a modern bureaucracy.

The fourth theme is the distinctive understanding of temporality in revolutionary communist thinking. Reinhart Koselleck notes the shift in the understanding of historical time. Before the eighteenth century temporality was seen as the repeated unfolding of eternal verities. ‘All variation, or change, *rerum commutation, rerum converse*, was insufficient to introduce anything novel into the political world. Historical experience remained involved in its almost natural givenness, and in the same way that the annual seasons through their succession remain forever the same, so mankind *qua* political beings remained bound to a process of change which brought forth nothing new under the sun’ [92: 41–2]. He goes on to describe the new quality with which historical time was imbued as a result of the concept of ‘revolution’ becoming more than circularity but overthrow and transcendence through a process of civil war. Like the Committee of Public Safety under Maximilian Robespierre and his fellow Jacobins in 1793–4, communism in Russia was mesmerised by a belief in history. Communist systems were regulated by a type of ‘revolutionary time’, inspired by a distinctive teleology focused on the ever-receding horizon of ‘communism’. This was a linear transition based on Hegelian ideas of dialectical transformation and transcendence, in which Marx’s ideas of revolutionary change are steeped. This characterises Lenin’s ideas from 1914, when he carried out a close reading of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* in response to the collapse of the Second International (the successor of Marx’s



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First International, an attempt to bring together the international socialist movement), and thus 'rediscovered the dialectic' from other Russian revolutionaries. The classic Hegelian idea of contradiction was now complemented by an emphasis on transition in which not only would the malevolent features of the old society be negated, but the very act of negation represented transcendence. This negative logic created an abyss at the heart of communism in Russia into which democratic pluralism and individual rights disappeared. The Soviet Union by its own self-characterisation was a transitional state, with socialism defined as the intermediate period in the shift from capitalism to communism; and in this transitional period the ideals that would be achieved in the final state did not apply, and thus a moral and political void was created.

This imbued the Soviet Union with a peculiar temporality where actual events were considered part of the unfolding of a revolutionary process, and thus served only as preparation for a different sort of time, when communism had been achieved. This relieved the regime, in its own eyes, of moral responsibility for its actions, since whatever actual crimes were committed today were 'for the good of the cause' (the reality of which Alexander Solzhenitsyn described so well in a powerful novella with that title). The present is devalued and emptied of intrinsic legitimacy; the anticipated future deprives the actual present of ontological significance. This represented a fundamental repudiation of Kantian morality, in which each individual is valued and each social act is judged in its own terms and not by some superior logic. Instead, Bolshevism in power from the very beginning was characterised by highly coercive practices and a moral relativism in which, as Lenin put it to the second Komsomol (Communist Youth League) congress in 1920, anything that served the revolution was moral. The ideology of transition legitimated the application of extreme violence 'temporarily' to destroy the alleged enemies of the revolution – the capitalist blood-suckers, the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, various renegades and backsliders, including later within the Bolshevik movement itself – to allow the communist social order, cleansed from unhealthy elements (as in the French revolution, the biomedical analogy was prevalent and epitomised by the concept of the 'purge'), to be built. There was no independent basis for morality, or indeed for politics in general, but whatever served the communist revolution was tautologically moral and appropriate.

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The collapse of communism was accompanied by the repudiation of Hegelian notions of transition in favour of attempts to restore the neo-Kantian impulse based on individual morality and the discourse of human and civil rights, and thus represented the repudiation of revolutionary time. The fall of communism in Russia was accompanied by a broader retreat from the progressive utopianism born in the Enlightenment, and thus the particular event in Russia to that degree had universal significance. In practical terms, however, the transition out of communism in certain respects mimicked the transition in the other direction, and thus the problem of revolutionary time was not resolved. The myth of the 1990s, where the 'Bolsheviks of the market' are charged with applying revolutionary methods to create a market-based democracy [141], stands as a symmetrical bookend to the history of communism in Russia: the revolutionary logic of transition created the communist system, and a similar logic was applied to its destruction at the end of the century. Thus 'revolutionary time' is certainly far from being a uniquely Bolshevik characteristic, but under their leadership (as during Jacobin rule) it was experienced with particular intensity.

A fifth theme is the role of ideology, ideas and political debate. There has been a long discussion on the degree to which the belief system of Bolshevik leaders shaped their political actions or whether the ideology served as little more than a mask to cover the actions of a grubby and violent self-serving elite. The problem is indeed a stark one, since so much of the practice of Soviet communism appears to repudiate basic principles of socialism. For example, from the very first days communist leaders became accustomed to higher living standards than the rank and file, and a finely graded system of privileges was the key instrument in Stalinist practices of governance. The corruption accompanying this inequality was one of the fundamental issues that provoked thousands to demonstrate against the communist regime in its dying days from the late 1980s. It is in this context that this work distinguishes between 'communism in Russia', which indicates that communism as an idea and set of practices existed separately from Russia, and 'Russian communism', which is the communism that is derived from Russia itself. The distinction of course is to a degree artificial, since for seven decades Russia and communism were bound together, but, as we shall see, the distinction remained valid and

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during the ‘great retreat’ in the final Soviet years the independent subjectivity of Russia emerged as the single most powerful force that extinguished the communist incubus.

The problem of ideology, however, is a much more complex one than the ‘masking’ analogy or any reductionist notion of simple instrumentality can convey. We argue that the tension between beliefs and actions corresponds to the distinction between a core and an operating ideology. The core ideology consists of a number of propositions that were irreducibly drawn from the classics, and as long as the systems remained loyal to them the system could be considered communist. These include the common ownership of the means of production, some sort of commitment to a non-capitalist order, certain inclusive principles encompassing primarily class but also nationality, and a participatory ethos, however vitiated in practice. Marx had always argued that communism was not a set of principles to be implemented but something that would be devised in practice, a view that distinguished his programme from that of the Utopian socialists. This left a lot of scope for the core ideology of Marxism to be reinterpreted, and opened the door for communist rulers to apply a modified version, adapted to the immediate challenges. This danger quickly became apparent following the Bolshevik seizure of power, since there was only a vague Marxist standard against which the actions of communism in power could be measured. This allowed the Russian communists to assert that socialism was whatever they said it was, and an operating ideology quickly took shape. For seven decades the Russian leadership was able to leverage its position as the first, and for a long time the only, socialist state to become the arbiter of ideological principle – until challenged by Mao Zedong and the Chinese communists from the 1950s, and various other forms of heterodox communism, notably the ‘self-managing socialism’ practiced in Yugoslavia from the 1950s. The core and operating ideologies in the Soviet Union were flexible enough to ensure that, in the main, they did not come into open opposition. They existed along a spectrum in which different aspects could be highlighted when appropriate; but, at the same time, both retained distinguishing characteristics.

The operating ideology allowed endless compromises with the realities of holding on to power and to maintaining the status of the Soviet Union, along with its revolutionary ideology, in

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international affairs. Thus even the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939, which paved the way for the start of the Second World War, can be seen as an instance of the necessary flexibility endowed by the operating ideology to allow the continued existence of the core ideology. The relationship between the two is absolutely crucial, and it is the sphere in which the endless compromises that are part of being in government are devised. From the 1990s the political systems in China and Vietnam, and increasingly in Cuba, were no longer communist in terms of the operating ideology of market-driven modernisation governed by a communist elite. There, as in the Soviet Union, the core ideology was not abandoned, since that would have undermined the fundamental legitimacy of the regimes. New bases of legitimacy have emerged, with a shift to national economic development becoming central in Soviet Russia and later in China, but this was couched in the language of the core ideology, whose influence was far from negligible however much the practices of the operating ideology may have extended the bounds of the pragmatic end of the spectrum. In the end, of course, the predominance of the operating ideology in China and elsewhere will become so salient as to occlude even the residual elements of the core ideology; and the states will no longer be recognisable as communist. Communism will simply have become the form in which the societies modernised themselves. Communism in Russia, however, was not fated to have such an evolutionary outcome where the system adapts to global challenges and societal needs, and instead ended in a catastrophic breakdown.

This brings us to the final theme, the relationship between social development and political change. This concerns not just the philosophy and politics of civil society, but the ‘materialist’ understanding of the development of productive forces and shifts in class relations in response to technological and economic development. Materialist approaches to the analysis of historical development are far from being a Marxist preserve, although in studying the Soviet Union and its fall idealist approaches, paradoxically, have taken a firm hold. In other words, the fall of the USSR is often couched in terms of the struggle for human freedom and the triumph of a Kantian approach to morality, which insists on the value of every life, espoused by the underground human rights movement. At the same time, Soviet industrialisation clearly transformed Russia and, in creating a modern society, undermined the archaic principles

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of rule practised by the Communist Party. Changes in Russian society and in the global economic system, in the organisation of managerial hierarchies and labour, and much more, interacted with the development of ideas in the struggle for socialism and later for democracy in Russia. In both the creation and destruction of communism in Russia there was no simple deterministic logic at work. The problem of civil society in many respects undermined Marx's view that 'being determines consciousness'; the experience of the USSR demonstrates the role that consciousness and agency play in determining historical outcomes, but they do not do so in a vacuum.

A people socialised for three generations in communist ideology in the end revolted against the tutelage of the communist order. In part this was a response to material factors, notably the evident inability of the Soviet Union to provide living standards comparable to those in the west, accompanied by gross political and social inequalities; but it also reflected the aspirations to achieve those freedoms and civic dignity to which the Russian revolution had aspired for so long before 1917. Thus Kant's idealism was vindicated against Marx's materialism. The emergence of critical thinking in the heart of the regime and a widespread passive dissent indicated that one of the great lessons of the experience of communism in Russia is that the 'human factor', the term used by Gorbachev during perestroika, in great projects for social amelioration remains central. An irreducible aspiration to freedom in the end meant that Orwell's dystopian vision of the future presented in his *1984* had a sequel which we can label *1989*, the year of the great anti-revolutionary movements that not only brought down the oppressive and incompetent authoritarian systems of actually existing socialism, but also repudiated the logic on which they had been based. The great retreat in Russia was in these terms not simply a long-delayed 'counter-revolution' to the Bolshevik seizure of power, but represented a more profound 'anti-revolution' that transcended the two centuries of progressive philosophy in which it had been embedded. Whether this prepares the space for an improved and more pluralistic socialism or another type of emancipation is a matter of opinion, but any attempt to develop such a post-communist movement will have to come to terms with the experience of communism in Russia, and this book is a modest contribution to that debate.

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This book makes no claim to be a full history of communism or of Russia. Instead it is an interpretative essay, raising certain questions about the nature and dynamics of communism in Russia, drawing on the major debates of our era while indicating some of the remaining controversies. Developments in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union are not covered. As it is an essay, only the most fundamental materials on which I have drawn directly will be referenced, although I acknowledge that I have drawn on a far greater body of scholarship in the preparation of this work.

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