



The Idea of Communism in the “Short Twentieth Century”

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FUTURE HISTORIANS WILL LIKELY FOCUS ON 1914-1991 AS A SINGLE PERIOD CHARACTERIZED by interrelated themes of revolution, ideological wars, and economic vagaries. The year 1914 will be the crucial date for the beginning of this “short twentieth century,”¹ for the world war which began in August of that year marked a break with the classic liberal values of free enterprise, individual autonomy, and political liberty that had suffused nineteenth-century European societies. The ebb of this liberal past was, as Hannah Arendt described, the condition for the “new idea” of totalitarian domination which constituted “a break with all our traditions” and which “clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards of moral judgment.”²

¹This phrase was first coined by the Hungarian economic historian, Ivan Berend, and applied by Eric Hobsbawm in his essay, “The Present as History,” in *On History* (New York: New Press, 1997).

²Quoted in Stan Spyros Draenos, “Thinking without a Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979) 209.

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No investigation of the church in the twentieth century will be adequate without understanding the Christian encounter with Marxism. Consideration of both the shared ideals and the radical disparities will continue to shape the church’s mission in the new century.

This “short twentieth century” can be said to have drawn to a close in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. For much of the preceding 77 years, the world was divided into “capitalist” and “socialist” camps that were considered mutually exclusive. The competition and interaction between these two camps influenced the direction of events and intellectual life throughout the remainder of the century, or at least until one of the combatants suddenly, and somewhat eerily, disappeared from the scene. By the end of this period, the world was a very different place: the political and economic power of a once dominant Europe had waned; the globe had become more of a single operational unit; and the old patterns of human social relationships, as found in traditional societies and religions, had all but disintegrated. After 1991, the dynamic tension which had shaped these transformations disappeared, and there was a general sense that a new era was beginning.

For Christians, a review of the “short twentieth century” is essential to grasp the background to modern currents in theology and changing conceptions of mission. As Denis Janz remarks, “Unless we struggle toward an understanding of the Christian encounter with Marxism, the entire Christian self-understanding in the late modern world will be inadequate.”³

I. TOTAL WARFARE AND REVOLUTION

The “short twentieth century” was born in war—almost one-half of this period, from 1914 to 1945, was scarred by two devastating wars, separated only by a period of uneasy peace and escalating brutality. Nowhere is the break with the nineteenth century described by Arendt more apparent than in the emergence of “total warfare” during the First World War. As Eric Hobsbawm has observed, one can read Jane Austen’s novels and be blissfully unaware of the Napoleonic wars raging in Europe at the time she wrote. But it is inconceivable that a European novelist in the three decades before 1945 could write without reference to the intense pressures exerted on societies and individuals by the wars of that time.⁴ These wars of attrition required a strong industrial base and were characterized by mass mobilizations that organized and motivated populations in unprecedented ways. This development, when coupled with technological advances in weaponry and air power, broadened the scope of military targets to include civilians, and the lingering images of Nanjing, Dresden, and Hiroshima have affected the public imagination up to the present.

The “command economies” essential to the execution of these modern wars provided a host of regimes with a model for speedy economic development that was to play such a role in justifying unparalleled forms of political domination. Lenin consciously modeled his economic program, called “war communism,” on the German economy during World War I, and Stalin’s five-year plans and Mao Tse-tung’s “great leap forward” followed suit. The word “totalitarian” was in fact

³Denis Janz, *World Christianity and Marxism* (New York: Oxford University, 1998) 4.

⁴Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Vintage, 1996) 44.

first coined by a German historian in 1930 to describe the mobilization of peoples by their states in World War I, and only later came to be applied to Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR.⁵ As such, the term implicitly recognizes that what Ortega y Gasset called the "revolt of the masses" grew out of the experience of total warfare.

The unspeakable horrors of World War I revived the idea of revolution, which had lain dormant in European politics since 1848. Both of the revolutionary movements that emerged after World War I, communism in Russia and fascism in Italy and Germany, were rooted in the extreme suffering of individuals and their families during this conflict. The war had mobilized tens of millions of men, and several million had died. Several million more returned home maimed or debilitated. This monstrous volume of individual tragedies gradually unhinged the societies and regimes involved. As François Furet observes, "By drafting all eligible men and requiring supreme sacrifice on the part of one and all, World War I turned everyone, no matter how humble, into a judge of the social contract."⁶ This was especially true of returning servicemen, whose anti-war passions had been stirred by their time at the front and who filled the ranks of the bolshevik and fascist parties that advocated the overthrow of the governments that had led to their participation in the war.

II. RED AND BROWN BOLSHEVISM

In the 1930s, the conflict between the communism centered in Moscow and the fascism that succeeded to power in Italy and Germany was characterized by outright hostility, which culminated in some of the bloodiest battles of World War II. However, this very real enmity should not obscure the fact that communism, as put into practice by Lenin, and fascism, as typified by Mussolini and Hitler, were very nearly mirror images of one another. Not only did they share the same single-party organization, which Mussolini had adopted, with admiring acknowledgements, from Lenin, but they shared a common psychology, shaped by conditions at the time of their emergence, as well. Furet describes this mindset succinctly:

Born of the war, both Bolshevism and Fascism drew their basic education from war. They transferred to politics the lessons of the trenches: familiarity with violence, the simplicity of extreme passions, the submission of the individual to the collectivity, and finally the bitterness of futile or betrayed sacrifices.⁷

Waldemar Gurian, a Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism who was forced to leave Germany in the 1930s, noted the connections between Lenin and Hitler in a book published in 1935 called *The Future of Bolshevism*. In this small volume, he argued that bolshevism had two varieties, red and brown, and that both were

⁵François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999) 158.

⁶Ibid., 60.

⁷Ibid., 163.

symptomatic of the political dissolution of European civilization. For Gurian, both movements were involved in the radical quest for total power, but it was “German Bolshevism” which best embodied the new phenomenon of the party-state with its declared mission of revolution by force.⁸

The similarities between the two revolutionary camps were partly due to the fact that they shared a common enemy: the liberal bourgeoisie. From our perspective at the end of the twentieth century, it is hard to fathom the depth of hatred and distrust directed against bourgeois society and parliamentary democracy in the wake of World War I. The image of democracy as a plutocracy disguised as politics was fortified in the minds of servicemen as they returned from an ordeal that members of parliament had voted for but not themselves undergone. In the minds of many, “the dictatorship of money,” that universal master of the bourgeoisie, had caused and prolonged the war; now, it was to be resisted and, if possible, overthrown. As a French fascist, Georges Valois, observed in 1925:

No matter which one prevails and absorbs the other, Communism in Russia and Fascism in Italy will have identical results. No Parliament, no democracy, a dictatorship, a nation that shapes itself. When the bourgeoisie has been booted out, the alliance between the state and the people will make everyone conform to the national discipline.⁹

The critique of bourgeois hypocrisy was the same from both sides: the moneyed class carried on about human rights and equality, while basing all its decisions on calculated self-interest. The law, justice, and democracy for which this class claimed universal validity was, in the eyes of its detractors, simply a ruse that masked its economic and political dominance. The German legal philosopher and National Socialist Carl Schmitt went even further in excoriating the “political romanticism” of democracy that undermined order in the name of discussion, pluralism, and rights. Liberalism was a “lie and a fraud” in his view, for he denied that it was possible to arrive at the truth through democratic discussion or that it was possible to institute a good society by asking people what they want.¹⁰ The essence of liberalism, from this perspective, was nihilism, a stage in the degeneration of western civilization that could only be overcome by a superhuman act of collective will.

These complaints rang true for large numbers of people, both inside and outside the western democracies, largely because these governments appeared enfeebled and unable to contend with the political, military, and economic realities that confronted them. Their inefficiency and questionable economic health, which hit rock bottom during the depression years, led many to believe their days were numbered. This diagnosis of the west was seconded by the German novelist Thomas Mann, who wrote in 1939 that, in contrast to Germany and the Soviet Union,

⁸Waldemar Gurian, *The Future of Bolshevism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936).

⁹Quoted in Furet, *Passing of an Illusion*, 306.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 373-374.

the western democracies were exhausted and disorganized. Although he hoped the democracies would eventually be victorious, he feared they were too "cosmopolitan, liberal, weak, divided and superficial" to oppose the unified will and purpose of the German and Russian peoples.¹¹

Both communism and fascism emerged from the inter-war period with a sense of superiority and historical destiny, and both were fired by the same tendency toward world evangelism that ultimately brought them into conflict. The "semi-socialism" of the German fascists, and the "semi-fascism" of the Russian communists, were comparable attempts to address the same set of problems: how to rebuild the true human community that had been destroyed by money and the bourgeoisie, and how to absorb private humanity, a particularly bourgeois notion, into public humanity. In short, communism and fascism were communitarian rivals, competing for the right to lead the west in the construction of an anti-bourgeois and post-individualist social order.

III. THE POPULAR FRONT

Although the National Socialists were able to attract distinguished intellectuals, such as Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, to their cause,¹² it was the communists who managed to win the lion's share of support from European intellectuals and from a surprising number of American intellectuals as well. A major part of communism's appeal was its ideological background, rooted in Marxism-Leninism, which purported to explain the decline of capitalism and its own historically necessary rise to world prominence. This faith in the inevitable triumph of communism was buttressed by the enthusiastic, world-wide response to the news of the Russian revolution in 1917. In the United States, for example, Finnish immigrants in Minnesota mining towns converted to communism en masse at meetings where, as one participant remembered, "the mentioning of the name of Lenin made the heart throb....In mystic silence, almost in religious ecstasy, did we admire everything that came from Russia."¹³ Even after the expected revolution in Germany failed to materialize (Lenin had made arrangements to move his capital from Moscow to Berlin in anticipation of a German uprising, a hope which dimmed after 1923), the rapid growth of the movement and the enthusiasm it sparked in countless regions around the world led to growing confidence, not only in its eventual success but also in its seemingly incontestable truth.

Red bolshevism also won widespread support because western intellectuals tended to interpret the events surrounding the Russian revolution in terms of the French revolution. This comparison, which was prevalent among French intellec-

¹¹Quoted in David Gress, *From Plato to Nato: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (New York: Free Press, 1998) 428.

¹²See Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* (London: Basic Books, 1993), for an account of intellectual life under National Socialism.

¹³Peter Koivisto, "The Decline of the Finnish-American Left, 1925-1945," in *International Migration Review* 17/1 (1983) 69.

tuals who formed the backbone of the largest communist party outside the Soviet Union, depicted communism as representing a higher form of democracy free from the injustices of capitalism. The identification of the Russian revolution as the second stage of the French revolution was used to justify the terror and violence of the Lenin and Stalin years as necessary to protect the revolution from its enemies. In the same way that the Jacobin phase of the French revolution depended on the guillotine to secure its gains, this thinking held, so coercion and purges were necessary to establish the revolution in the Soviet Union.

Certainty in the victory of communism over liberalism was also encouraged by the depression, which appeared to many to mark the collapse of the capitalistic world economic order. The effects of this trauma cannot be underestimated in the history of the twentieth century. The depression destroyed all hope of restoring the economy and the society of the nineteenth century. Old-fashioned liberalism was dead or seemed doomed. Among those unmoored from their history by the depression and convinced that the centralized economy of the USSR presented the wave of the future was the Cambridge group, a talented contingent of aristocratic British university students who used their rank to become spies for the Soviet Union. These young men were the orphans of a class and an empire that had once ruled the world but that now was disintegrating before their eyes. Driven by disgust with their privileged background and dazzled by the prospect of a new era of history under Soviet tutelage, their commitment to world revolution was symbolic of the force of the communist idea in the period after the depression.¹⁴

Underlying belief in the historical necessity of the communist idea was a yearning for community that drew Christian supporters into the orbit of the anti-liberal left. Not surprisingly, many of these “fellow travelers” came from the Roman Catholic Church, which had, on occasion, denounced modern democracy and liberalism. Typical of these leftist Catholics was the *Esprit* circle in France in the 1930s and 1940s, which openly criticized the “moneygrubbing, alienating, exploitative, capitalist West” and longed for a community “where the activities of individuals are organized to serve the common good, as foreshadowed in the divine will and in the sacrifice of Christ.” Although few of these Catholics called themselves communists, they shared with that group a hostility to capitalism which nourished dialogue between them and permitted common action. The goal for both the *Esprit* group and the socialists of the 1930s was to “reconstruct, on the wreckage of individualism, a fraternal world of human beings associated for a common purpose.”¹⁵

Sympathy for anti-bourgeois attitudes on the left was also found among Protestants. Paul Tillich, for example, during his phase as a “religious socialist,” maintained that “the bourgeois world has spoken its heathen ‘Yes’ to the world” and

¹⁴Andrew Boyle, *The Fourth Man: The Definitive Account of Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, and Donald Maclean and Who Recruited Them to Spy for Russia* (New York: Dial, 1979).

¹⁵Furet, *Passing of an Illusion*, 307-308.

went on to claim that its “cultural accomplishments” were “ill suited to become a positive law of order in the whole of society.”¹⁶ For Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others, it was necessary to oppose the bourgeois order by assuming the perspective of the workers. In a quote later used by Helmut Gollwitzer to introduce the book *Jesus for Atheists*, by the Czechoslovakian Marxist Milan Machovec, Bonhoeffer wrote:

What does it mean when a proletarian in his suspicious world says, “Jesus is a good man”? He means that one need not distrust him. The proletarian does not say, “Jesus is God”; but in saying that Jesus was a good man he says in any case a great deal more than a bourgeois who says that Jesus is God....[I]n the factories Jesus can be present as the socialist; in the political world as the idealist; in the proletarian existence as the good man. In their ranks he fights with them against the enemy—Capitalism.¹⁷

These theologians were intent on demonstrating that Christianity was more than a bourgeois ideology, as the traditional Marxist critique claimed, used to exonerate the injustices of capitalism.

IV. LEFT FOR DEAD

Future historians of the last half of the twentieth century will confront a number of perplexing problems, but perhaps the most difficult question will concern the sudden disappearance of the communist idea. This event is all the more mystifying because of the assumption, common in the decades after World War II, that Soviet communism had maintained its progressive momentum and continued to ride the tide of history. Certainly, it had emerged from the war with added prestige because of the major role it had played in the defeat of Germany—not only had it been outspoken in its critique of Hitler before the war, while the liberal democracies had wavered, but it had absorbed incredible punishment while wearing down and eventually defeating the German armies that had invaded the Soviet Union.

After the war, it was perhaps inevitable there would be a world-wide tilt to the left, for, as Hobsbawm notes, “the logic of the anti-fascist war led towards the Left.”¹⁸ This tilt was evident wherever there were genuine elections, such as in the British Labor Party’s victory over Winston Churchill, and in the new predilection for economic interventionism and rational planning among liberals as a means of avoiding a repeat of the depression. Most importantly, the defeat of fascism left communism as the only source of criticism against bourgeois democracy. The political result of the 1945 victory was to grant communists a “monopoly on the dominant passion of prewar European politics—hatred of money and of capital-

¹⁶Quoted in Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958) 105.

¹⁷Quoted in James Bentley, *Between Marx and Christ* (London: Verso, 1982) 8.

¹⁸Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 163.

ism.”¹⁹ As the bearers of the anti-capitalist standard, the communists could assume the “greatest role of the democratic repertory: criticism of democracy in the name of...a democracy freed from the power of money.”²⁰

The sense of historical inevitability was fed by the dramatic extension of the socialist zone after World War II. Between the wars, communists had liked to boast of their domination of one-sixth of the world’s surface, but this boast was surpassed as their territory expanded rapidly after the war to include the Baltic states, most of central Europe and a major portion of Germany. Meanwhile, a new extension of the socialist region was occurring in the far east, with the transfer of power to communist regimes in China, North Korea, and, after 30 years of war, to what had been French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). Other additions included Cuba in 1959 and parts of Africa in the 1970s. Whereas the push into central Europe had resulted from the occupation of Soviet troops after the war, the other nations that chose to secede from world capitalism were motivated by nationalism, anti-imperialism, and the desire to modernize rapidly. In pursuit of the latter goal, the apparent success of the Soviet-style command economy, the expansion of which had outpaced capitalist economies into the late 1950s, provided developing nations with a model for rapid economic growth.

The momentum of communism seemed even more irresistible as the critique of the west, and particularly of the United States, erupted with renewed force in the 1960s. This was a reinvigorated attack on liberal democracy, based on the old suspicion that its commitment to law and justice was little more than a cover for bourgeois ascendancy. These denunciations were given life through the work of “new left” theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, who compared Germany in the 1930s with America in the 1960s, and warned that “liberalism produces the total authoritarian state.”²¹ American democracy was thoroughly bourgeois, in his mind, and was therefore an enemy of the more genuine democracy represented by communism. To many, these criticisms were seemingly given substance by the civil rights movement and by America’s role in Cuba and Vietnam. In the minds of some, Marcuse’s apparent discovery of “fascism” at the core of American democracy amounted to a social crisis that could only be resolved by revolution. In the words of a radical editorial from that time, this crisis was “so pervasive and profound as to lift the prospect of revolution from the realm of utopian speculation and raise it as a real political alternative.”²²

The response among leftists to Soviet communism at this time was ambiguous. Khrushchev’s revelations in 1956 of Stalin’s crimes had initiated a crisis in the movement which was eventually addressed by a variation of the French Revolution analogy called the “theory of two communisms.” This theory argued that

¹⁹Furet, *Passing of an Illusion*, 357.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 369.

²¹Quoted in Gress, *Plato to Nato*, 408.

²²Quoted in David Horowitz, *Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 190.

the shortcomings of Soviet communism were lamentable side-effects of a "pregnancy" that would give birth to a superior communism, perhaps even the higher democracy radicals had long expected. Two schools of thought emerged: one which expected the more advanced communism to appear in third-world nations like China, Cuba, and Vietnam, and one which expected the breakthrough in the Soviet bloc. In either case, leftists suggested, gratitude was due to the Soviets for their role in bringing this new world to light, and whatever their failures might be, they were still to be preferred to the dangers of capitalism.

Under the influence of this "theory of two communisms," many Christians found grounds for working alliances with communist parties in different places. Despite their obvious disagreement on fundamental beliefs and the problems in church-state relations these caused in socialist areas, Christians and communists shared a hope for a more humane and just social order that formed the basis for dialogue and common action. In the process, the understanding of the church's mission was broadened to include new forms of political and economic involvement. In the third world, many western Christians became interested (somewhat naively in retrospect) in what appeared to be new possibilities for human society presented by developments in China and Cuba; they even became directly involved in Marxist-inspired movements, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and, through the World Council of Churches, guerrilla groups in Africa. And in the Soviet bloc, most notably in Czechoslovakia during the Prague spring of 1968, Christians and communists engaged each other in conversations that would have a significant effect on the development of political and liberation theologies in recent decades.

The decline of the world communist movement began with the breakdown of the "two communisms" theory. Significantly, this occurred first among intellectuals in the ideological capital of that movement, Paris. The theory broke under the weight of events such as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and violent crimes perpetrated by terrorist organizations that used Marxist jargon to justify their actions. Any lingering notion that Soviet-style communism could give birth to a higher form of democracy was laid to rest with the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*. As Paul Berman has noted, "In the entire history of literature there has probably never been another book that altered public attitudes and political events so swiftly and radically as the French translation of Solzhenitsyn's *Archipelago*."²³ For Andre Glucksmann, the philosophical leader of the 1968 generation in France, the litany of Gulag tragedies forced a final break with his Marxist past, a past he now contemplated with horror for his intellectual complicity in such crimes. His personal sense of guilt led him to propose an eleventh commandment to be appended to the biblical ten: "You shall know yourself capable of being a monster, even if it means saying, 'Hitler, c'est moi.'"²⁴

²³Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: Norton, 1996) 274.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 294.

The movement's loss of the moral high ground is only part of the story, however, for there were impersonal forces at work as well, eroding the day-to-day operations of "really existing socialism" and eating away at its economic and social functions. The economy of the Soviet bloc began to falter and then regress after the 1950s, overwhelmed by the inefficiencies and inequalities of an over-bureaucratized planning system. These failings forced it to seek a degree of integration into the world capitalist system, a Pandora's box which, when opened, unleashed a host of outside influences that could not be controlled. Ultimately, it was the inability of the Soviet model to adjust to the new economic circumstances that caused its collapse. Although transferred to a wide variety of cultures, communism continued to repeat the lessons it had learned from World War I and to reproduce the "ruthless, brutal, command socialism" that had grown out of that conflagration. Gorbachev's introduction of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) in the 1980s was an attempt to save socialism by bringing it into the present, but the system had become too petrified to respond; it could only crack apart. The "vanguard of history" vanished because it was too deeply entrenched in the total warfare of the past.

V. WHAT'S LEFT?

The meaning of the collapse of Soviet communism will be debated for decades. One effect of the events surrounding the fall of the Berlin wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union was the discrediting of the left in all its diversity. Richard Rorty, for one, has lamented the "eclipse of the reformist Left," and has claimed that "Marxism was not only a catastrophe for all the countries in which Marxists took power, but a disaster for the reformist Left in all the countries in which they did not."²⁵ Rorty and others view the obliteration of the left as having negative consequences for liberal democracy in the long run. Russell Jacoby, for example, argues that the "end of utopia" is a "seismic event" that will leave liberalism without an ideal standard with which to judge and guard against the excesses of capitalism.²⁶ The result is likely to be a reversion on a global scale to some of the least attractive aspects of capitalism, compounded by the lack of any institutional power to hold these tendencies in check. This development, in turn, could lead to the recreation of the conditions that gave rise to the twentieth-century revolutionary movements in the first place. Alexander Solzhenitsyn has issued this stern warning for the future:

Although the earthly ideal of Socialism-Communism has collapsed, the problems it purported to solve remain: the brazen use of social advantage and the inordinate power of money, which often direct the very course of events. And if the

²⁵Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1998) 39.

²⁶Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

global lesson of the twentieth century does not serve as a healing inoculation, then the vast red whirlwind may repeat itself in entirety.²⁷

There can be little doubt that the confrontation with twentieth-century communism, and the Marxist ideal on which it was partly based, has had a strong influence on Christian life and thought. Denis Janz argues this encounter "may well be the defining event of twentieth-century Christianity."²⁸ For Christians, the collapse of the communist idea raises a number of significant questions: How has Christianity been changed by this encounter? Are these changes enduring, or will they gradually disappear? Are the ideals that Christians and communists shared and which led to their commitment to common action and dialogue now to be abandoned? Consideration of these questions will help shape the mission of Christians and the church in an unpredictable global future. ⊕

²⁷Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in the *New York Times*, 28 November 1993.

²⁸Janz, *World Christianity and Marxism*, 150.