

COMMUNIST SYSTEM

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Summary

The communist system aimed to build a new type of human society, based on solidarity and the fulfillment of people's needs. The system was under construction in Russia from 1917, reaching stability only in the 1950s. It was adopted in other countries after the Second World War, following the victories of Soviet-inspired or -supported communists, but in most it collapsed near the end of the twentieth century under the combined weight of elite disillusionment and popular discontent. The general shape of the communist system owes far more to the practical exigencies of the first communist state, the national traditions it inherited, and Lenin's unshakeable belief in the Bolsheviks' duty to take and keep power, than to any theoretical blueprint. The key feature of this system is the directing role of the communist party, and the consequent subordination of all constitutional forms, and all social and economic activity, to the party's rule. National variations modified this tenet only slightly. The central developments of communist states found their impetus in the communist party. There were, in addition, strong links between the party leader's personal style and the behavior and policies of communist governments. Decision-making was conducted chiefly within the party, out of public gaze or control. Rule was maintained by a combination of manufactured "consent" based on ideology and outright coercion. Whether it took the form of terror or not, this coercion was essentially arbitrary. By 1989, however, most

communist leaders lacked the conviction to continue coercing their populations, and their rule collapsed. The few remaining communist states tend to rely on determined, but aging, leaders. Communist states have modernized and industrialized their countries, but they have proved unable to innovate or change easily. Launched with great enthusiasm, built on enormous sacrifice, they nevertheless settled into authoritarian routines, which neglected the cost in human suffering.

1. Introduction

The “communist system” is the title loosely applied to the political and economic organization of states which share the following general characteristics: they are ruled by a single party; they are formally committed to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism; and a large part (if not all) of their economy is in public hands. This system was eventually established in at least 14 countries around the world, encompassing perhaps one-third of the world’s population at its height. It grew, in large part, from the example—and even under the direction—of the first communist state established in Russia from October 1917 (in the old-style calendar). The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had great influence over later communist states. But the “communist system” is not monolithic. Many communist states have differed, in degree, from the Soviet model; many have differed from each other on a range of issues, even about what “communism” itself means. The shape of the communist system nevertheless owes a substantial debt to the early Soviet history of emergency control and the demands of sheer survival, as well as to the Russian heritage. It is therefore the Soviet model that will provide the signposts for this article.

Economically backward, Russia, emerging from the exhaustion of war and from a Tsarist state, based on strict hierarchy and extensive internal surveillance since the time of Peter the Great, was the state in which V. I. Lenin’s Bolshevik Party took power, determined to survive and prosper as a guide for communists everywhere. The first communist state was characterized by centralized power, hierarchy and subordination, and by a system of internal surveillance and coercion nurtured by civil war. It drew to a lesser extent on Marxist ideology, as interpreted by Lenin: an ideology which found political inspiration in the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, and praised the council—or “soviet”—form as vastly more democratic than the “talking-shop” of parliament, but had almost nothing to say about the details and dangers of political institutions as such.

Once the communist system was launched, Marx’s theory could provide little guidance to ruling communist parties about the practical problems of political, or economic, organization. The pronouncements made by Lenin in the first turbulent years of the new communist state were embroidered, as required, by his successors to form a theoretical framework for the new system. One central preoccupation made these adaptable norms seem more like rationalizations: the commitment of the communist party to maintaining itself in power. And one irony stands out from the entire communist experience: a continued theoretical commitment to the “withering away” of the state was matched by the expanding functions and reach of the state such that it eventually encompassed almost every aspect of life.

2. Origins and Early Development

The Soviet system was not created from some blueprint of government; its theoretical inspirers—especially Karl Marx—had excluded such blueprints as unnecessarily limiting options on the future. And it consciously rejected some of the “bourgeois” political forms, such as the rule of law and the separation of powers, as simply disguises for the rule of the capitalist class. Its theoretical guides had nevertheless made some general remarks about how such a system was likely to work: Marx, in discussing the Paris Commune, and Lenin, in his *State and Revolution* in 1917. Neither anticipated the problems which would face a communist government, either in general, or in a largely peasant country. Both were concerned, instead, with highlighting problems and inequities in the capitalist state, and insisting that it could not serve the purposes of the new, historic ruling class: the proletariat. Furthermore, the communist system was envisaged as a temporary affair, for the explicitly “political” aspects of government were seen as emblematic of the class struggle (which would soon disappear), and the administrative aspects of government were, as Lenin put it, akin to “bookkeeping” which anyone could do. At the beginning of the communist system, therefore, its founders looked forward with optimism to the end of politics: to a society that was orderly without the need for politics, because there were no longer any fundamental conflicts to resolve (see *Socialism and Communism*).

The communist system is relatively successful at imposing order, and indeed puts a priority on it. Having taken power, communists were keen to entrench the rule of their party before they undertook their economic tasks (especially industrialization). This meant the progressive elimination of all rival parties, and then the elimination of dissent within the communist party itself. Continuing discipline was demanded in the enduring struggle against “class enemies” both within and outside the system. By the early 1920s, the model for this top-down party control was complete: the centralized control of all key appointments within party and state; strict party discipline; and party supremacy over state institutions.

The Bolsheviks came to power by working through the “soviets”, a popular council structure that sprang up after the demise of Tsarism in the 1917 “February Revolution” and soon rivaled the more traditional Provisional Government. They praised the democratic—that is, diverse—character of the soviets, until they cemented their hold on power. Soon after their revolution, however, they began to outlaw opposition parties including the rival socialist parties. In 1921, the Red Army put down a rising at the Kronstadt naval base, composed of workers and sailors who had supported the Bolshevik revolution but maintained that the soviets must continue to represent all shades of workers’ interests. This pre-history of the USSR (which was formally declared at the beginning of 1924) was a period of consolidation of Communist Party rule (the Bolsheviks took the name “Communist Party” in 1918). The Bolsheviks were adamant that they were the genuine—and thus the only—representative of the historic interests of the working class and of socialism. Whether by luck, good management, audacity, or some combination of these, they had taken the levers of power in Russia, and they believed they had a historical duty not to let them go. The notion of a responsibility to history—rather than to actual workers and peasants—exercised a great

sway over the early Bolshevik leaders, though it soon became a hollow excuse for avoiding short-term responsibility to Soviet citizens.

Due to the continuing gap in the understanding of this historical duty between the ruling party and citizens, the latter could never be trusted with any real political participation except through the authorized channels, nor with any real say apart from the guidance of the party. But there was another respect in which political dissent was seen as unnecessary and dangerous, for the very notion of politics changed with the advent of the communist system. Communism had a mission; politics was thus not an endless debate about different ends, it was a team effort to find the best ways to achieve the given end. The discussion of “ends” was officially off the agenda. Opposition to socialism was, by definition, reactionary sabotage—backed by internal, or foreign, class enemies—which had to be met with coercion, not reasoned discussion. Thus communism challenged the very notion of a political system. It may have been a system of rule, but it authorized discussion of differences only at the highest levels, and even at this level failure could have life-threatening consequences. This understanding of the communist system can help to explain much about its institutions and development. In particular, the emphasis on the correctness and historical prescience of communist party doctrine—which meant the pronouncements of its highest bodies, and especially its preeminent leader—enshrined a culture of obedience and a suspicion of differences, especially the smallest differences. The doctrine of freedom, which animated many of the early Bolsheviks became a practice of servility. It produced a system that became brittle, since it allowed no outlet for change beyond what was authorized by the leader.

3. The Communist Party

Of any political system it is essential to ask: who rules; how do they rule; how do the rulers deal with change; and how do the rulers succeed one another? In the communist system, the simple answers to these questions are that the communist party rules, that it rules by way of a state structure which does not constrain its will, that it has no established procedure for dealing with substantial change, and that succession in leadership is a process handled by the innermost circles of the party with no public comment or accountability. The question of the relation between party and state is central to understanding the communist system. Policy is the prerogative of the party, and party members are placed in state positions throughout the country. Such placement is a task of the party secretariat (whence it derived its enormous power).

The communist party is the single most important institution in the whole communist system. It is not a party designed to aggregate and represent social interests; it is an instrument for taking power and transforming society (see *Political Parties*). Thus when trying to determine the locus of power in a communist system, it is not always appropriate to look simply at the head of state, such as a president, or at the head of government, such as a premier. The real power has generally belonged to the party leader, whether he be called Secretary, or General Secretary, and whether or not he also holds the top state post.

The first communist party was a creation of Lenin. In debates within Russian “Social Democracy” at the beginning of the twentieth century, he outlined what was required of

such a party in terms of the level of professionalism of its members, secrecy, and organizational procedures. These guidelines were adopted by other communists after the Bolshevik revolution, and were soon enforced by the Communist International (an international organization of communist parties, dominated by Moscow). A communist party was, above all else, centralized. But this was tempered by the notion of “democratic centralism”. All members, when authorized by their superiors to do so, were able to discuss and question policy; but once a decision had been made, it had to be obeyed. Rigidly hierarchical, the party looked to its leader or leaders for guidance. But the authority of leaders was based not just on their powers of persuasion and logic (though this was a major factor in Lenin’s own ascendancy), but eventually an organizational control by the party secretariat which was responsible for the assignments and promotion of party members. The leader was supported by those who owed him their positions (and with them, their privileges). This became a critical factor in the rise of Joseph Stalin in the early 1920s. Stalin at first worked through the Party to consolidate his support base, but from about 1936 onwards, he used the secret police even against the Party to establish his personal dictatorship. No Party congress was called between 1939 and 1952. Seventy percent of the Central Committee members elected at the 1934 Party congress did not survive Stalin’s purges.

If the later period of Stalin’s rule represented a substantial challenge to the party, it reasserted itself after his death. Indeed, Stalin’s death in 1953 presented the Soviet system with an interesting dilemma. In re-establishing the regular channels of rule (which most of Stalin’s survivors wished to do; personal caprice was not, they realized, a useful way to rule), they had to choose between ruling via the state structure or via the party. Under N. S. Khrushchev, the party gained the ascendancy, but not before a period of uncertainty and challenge by his rival Malenkov, a party leader who also used his state positions to advantage.

The structure of the party, and its principle of “democratic centralism,” reinforced the reality of top-down control, and the view that lower levels could not be trusted to make correct decisions. Party congresses, whether they occurred regularly or not, were largely a form of theater to endorse leaders and their decisions, not a genuine opportunity to discuss policies. Between congresses, the Central Committee was in charge of party activities, and above all this was the Political Bureau (or Politburo), a committee of the former, which made policy.

If the system thus far described seems a type of war by the party on society, it was not without its supporters and beneficiaries. Communist parties often overthrew corrupt, authoritarian regimes, and enjoyed a residual goodwill from their citizens; their stated goals often aroused enthusiasm and considerable self-sacrifice on the part of people enthused about building a new society. The party attracted to its ranks, both those who were ideologically committed to its goals and (once it had taken power), those who recognized that personal success could only be had through it. In times of great stress on the system, particularly after the invasion of the Soviet Union by Adolf Hitler’s armies in 1941, the Communist Party successfully presented itself as the defender of additional values, notably patriotism. The party was a way of enrolling citizens—the best citizens—in the cause of the future. Communist parties have varied in size during their control of the state, but they often included a significant proportion of the population.

With full members, candidate members, and youth members, as well as an organizational structure that covered every region and reached into every workplace, the party was pervasive. Socialization into the party was a way of continuing its values and its power.

The importance of leadership, particularly individual leadership, is confirmed by all the major decisions and campaigns made under communism, and even the campaigns—“perestroika” (or re-structuring in the economy); “glasnost” (or openness in government); and “new thinking” (in foreign policy), all of them introduced by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev—that eventually led to its collapse in Europe and Russia. Communist systems have been leader-focused to an extraordinary extent. Leon Trotsky pointed to the logic of “substitutionism” in his early critique of Lenin’s plan for the vanguard party: the party would substitute for the masses; the Central Committee would substitute for the party; and ultimately the leader would substitute for them all. In 1917, when he joined the Bolsheviks and played a key role in the October Revolution, he seemed to think that “substitutionism” was a risk worth taking to create the first “workers’ state”. But the logic to which Trotsky had pointed proved unstoppable, and the USSR was soon at the mercy of Stalin’s whim. Despite its focus on leadership, the communist system has found it impossible to institutionalize leadership succession. Contending successors have appealed to either party or state bases of support, signaling a more fundamental problem about the ultimate locus of authority in the system. And incumbent leaders are suspicious of potential successors. Leadership succession thus involves internal politicking and radical uncertainty. The devastating Cultural Revolution of the 1960s was, in part, a product of leadership rivalries within the Chinese Communist Party.

4. Institutional Framework

A description of the “skeleton” of a political system—as supplied by its formal institutions, such as legislature, executive, laws, and judiciary—is important, but it cannot tell the full story. In constitutional monarchies, for example, great formal powers are held by the monarch, but they are exercised only on the advice of the government of the day: the monarch has become in most respects a figurehead. In some constitutions, moreover, key political positions or actors (“Prime Ministers” or “political parties”) are not mentioned, but are assumed. If this is a complication in describing any political system, it is acute in the case of the communist system. For there, the difference between form and substance is profound and deliberate. Where, in many other political systems, the difference has arisen over time, in the communist system form is largely designed to obscure substance. Thus the Soviet Constitution adopted in December 1936 and proclaiming the rights of individuals, was introduced in the midst of the Great Terror of 1936–1938, in which millions of people perished with either perfunctory, or no, trial.

The communist system is, in essence, the organized form of the rule of a communist party. The formal political, legal and other institutions that might subsequently be put into place—or be refashioned from what existed before the party took power—are subordinate. They make it possible; they do not challenge, or mediate, or ameliorate it. Furthermore, the constitutional structure does not delineate the public space wherein

alternative policies are debated, decisions or compromises negotiated, and governments formed. Politics as the discussion of different ends has no public place. The only possible area of discussion is about the appropriate means to realize socialism. And in communist states, even differences over the question of means are rarely aired in public. It is considered important to maintain the appearance of unanimity, accord and order. Communist citizens have thus had little understanding of politics as the reconciling of differences, and though they were routinely brought into the political process it was not as participants but as cheering supporters of policies they had no part in creating.

4.1 The Communist Constitution and its Role

A constitution establishes the major institutions of a state, allocates them powers, and outlines the relations between them. It cannot identify every detail, and it depends also on conventions: agreements or understandings on ways to act that are not written into the rules, but function as a rule. In these ways, a constitution is not so rigid that it cannot adapt to new and unexpected challenges. Traditionally, constitutions were also designed to enforce certain state behaviors, and thus to help protect citizens against arbitrariness. In particular, they were drafted to guard against the concentration of power in one set of hands (see *Constitutional Government*). In communist systems, however, the constitution is not designed to act as a genuine barrier to the will of the communist party. The 1936 Soviet Constitution set out the “Basic Rights and Duties of Citizens”, but in such a way as not to challenge the communist party on any matter, and so as to give no effective means of enforcing these rights. Important rights such as freedom of speech and assembly were “guaranteed”, but only if they were “in accordance with the interests of the toilers”, and with “the aim of strengthening socialist order”. In other words, these guarantees were qualified out of existence.

What, then, is the purpose of communist constitutions? Certainly, they establish state institutions and specify their general functions, but given the monopoly of power by the communist party such institutions can only operate in the way the party directs. The main purpose seems rather to be a propagandist one: an attempt to convince outsiders that the formal framework and guarantees of the communist system are better and more democratic than the bogus freedoms of the liberal democratic capitalist states. The constitutions of communist states use traditional names for institutions that do not do the same job as their namesakes. This makes their examination a little confusing. Thus a “party” does not compete for power; and an “election” does not decide between competing candidates. Communist constitutions represent merely the “dignified” and not the “effective” parts of the political system, to use Bagehot’s terms.

In capitalist states—and whatever political system was operating—communists argued that the “real” rulers were the capitalist class. Thus in communist states, and whatever the political form, as long as the communist party ruled then the working class was ruling. The identity of the party and the working class—or at least, the working class’s historic interests—was assumed, not tested. Indeed, it could not be tested, because it was a matter of theoretical conviction, or faith. Consequently, institutional questions were secondary. There was no heed of Lord Acton’s well-known dictum that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, because there was considered to be no difference between rulers and ruled. The liberal response—enshrined in

Western constitution-making—was that no political office should be trusted absolutely. But for communists, only the exploiters would abuse power; they could not conceive that there was a need for limiting the power of the communist party and its functionaries in the state. Assuming the best, they were not prepared for the worst: eventually creating a society of massive corruption, arbitrariness and distrust.

4.2 Levels of Government

In some communist states, notably the USSR, but also Yugoslavia, the formal political structure was described by the state constitution as federal: an arrangement where power is divided between two sets of autonomous governments according to some constitutional formula (see *Federal System*). But the powers of the central governments were extensive, in terms of defense and other dealings outside the union, and in terms of internal matters including the economy. Thus, each separate republic had very little effective or even legal control over matters in its territory. And though the union was supposedly voluntary, the right to secede from it was illusory. In Yugoslavia, the attempt to decentralize decision making, and to allow more autonomy to each republic went much further than in the USSR. But behind the federal state structure of each lay a unitary party command. Indeed, in multinational communist states, federalism helped to integrate into political positions the local ethnic elite, and thus to integrate the state itself.

The sub-divisions of the communist system are administrative, rather than political. Despite numerous administrative regions, and thus an extensive system of local government, these levels of government have no autonomy and little responsibility. The logic of centralized control of industry and agriculture, and the demands of a fully centralized communist party, cut across whatever subdivisions are deemed useful for the moment. And at the lowest level, local soviets are simply local representatives of the central state power, with no ability to make autonomous decisions, nor to raise any substantial local monies.

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Biographical Sketch

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