**Why did Communism end when it did?**

**Archie Brown discusses the contributions of historians to the understanding of Communism and why it failed.**

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Exactly a quarter of a century has passed since the start of a seven-year period that changed Europe dramatically and saw the end of the Cold War. It was on March 11th, 1985 that the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union chose Mikhail Gorbachev as its leader. From that moment an increasingly radical reform process, *perestroika*, was launched.

Before an author tries to explain when and why Communism ended, it helps to know what Communism is – what distinguishes Communist systems from other highly authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Communism in its heyday in power had six essential defining characteristics. The first two are related to its political organisation: the monopoly of power of a Communist party and rigid discipline and strict hierarchy within that party – what was euphemistically known as ‘democratic centralism’. Communism’s two economic defining features were its centralised, command economy (with prices and output targets fixed administratively) and state ownership of the means of production. There were also two characteristics of great ideological significance – the sense of belonging to an international Communist movement greater than the sum of its parts and the aspiration to build ‘communism’, the classless, stateless society of the future. Hazy and remote that last goal may have been, but it was the ideological justification for the party’s ‘leading and guiding role’ and one of the many features distinguishing Communist countries from states ruled by socialist parties of a social democratic type.

It is clear that Communism has ended in Europe. Yet that isn’t the whole story. It may reasonably be objected that in the wider world Communism hasn’t ended yet. However, the two most populous of the five remaining Communist states, China and Vietnam (the former with 16 times more people than the latter), have largely abandoned a Communist economic system, although they retain the political power structures. Change is underway in Laos, and Cuba will evolve more quickly now that the Obama administration is abandoning America’s longstanding and counterproductive policy of boycotting its small island neighbour. North Korea remains in a class of its own – a monument of unreconstructed Communism which will come crashing down one of these days, possibly at, or soon after, the next dynastic succession. Hereditary rule has been the one startlingly unorthodox variation of Communist government to be developed by Kim Ilsung and Kim Jong-il. The cult of the leader’s personality has also been taken a shade further in North Korea, but Stalin, Mao and Ceausescu were already strong contenders in that particular competition to set Marx spinning in his Highgate grave.

The development of Communist *doctrine* occurred primarily in the 19th century with the growth of an industrial working class and the conclusions Marx and Engels drew from this. Their theory was supplemented, especially on the political organisational side, by Lenin in the last years of that century and the first two decades of the next. The rise of Communist *systems* was the most momentous political development of the first half of the 20th century, their fall the most dramatic occurrence of its second half. The relative importance for that demise of ideas, individuals and economic decline is hotly debated.

The belief that the Bolsheviks had the right ideas but they were distorted and trampled on by Stalin has fewer adherents than in the past. In the uncompromising judgement of Richard Pipes: ‘Communism was not a good idea that went wrong, it was a bad idea’ (Pipes, *Communism: A Brief History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001). In general, however, Pipes gives short shrift to the significance of ideas for politicians in Communist systems (as distinct from zealots joining the party in non-Communist countries). He is right in supposing that few party officials spent much time poring over the works of Marx and Lenin. Yet, there were many aspects of the doctrine which were accepted unquestioningly by these same officials and which were essential ideological underpinnings of the regimes.

Communist rule involved a large measure of coercion, but especially in consolidated Communist systems it did not rely on coercion alone. An official language of politics prevailed which made certain concepts almost literally unthinkable. To alter radically the vocabulary of politics had serious implications for the exercise of political power. Thus, when Mikhail Gorbachev as early as 1987 used the term ‘pluralism’ positively (albeit, initially a ‘socialist pluralism’ – later he was to embrace ‘political pluralism’), this gave a green light to radically reformist party intellectuals to publish critiques of the Soviet past and present which undermined the authority of the ruling *nomenklatura*. Gorbachev himself told party officials in 1988 that the Communists had gratuitously awarded themselves the right to rule over the entire population. In future, if they were to justify their ‘leading role’, it should be on the basis of contested elections. (The first competitive elections in Soviet history for a legislature with real power duly took place the following year.)

In a more profound study than that of Pipes, Andrzej Walicki (*Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*, Stanford University Press, 1995) pays due attention to the significance of ideas in the dismantling of a Communist system in the Soviet Union (as, in impressive detail, does Robert D. English in *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War*, Columbia University Press, 2000). The change in ideas had profound international consequences. It was in 1988 that Gorbachev declared that the people of every country had the right to choose for themselves what their political and economic system should be. As Walicki observes, it is hardly surprising that a major ‘consequence of this frankness was the collapse of Communism in Poland and, soon afterward, in the other countries of East-Central Europe’.

Communism would have ended years earlier throughout most of Eastern Europe but for the belief, based on experience, that any attempt to discard Communist rule there would produce Soviet armed intervention to reimpose it. Thus the change in the USSR was the crucial facilitating condition for all that happened in 1989. That Gorbachev – a radical reformer holding the most powerful office within the system – played the decisive role in all of this has become increasingly accepted, even by authors who have focused mainly on the process of change throughout Eastern Europe during 1989, such as Robin Okey (*The Demise of Communist East Europe: 1989 in Context*, Arnold, 2004). The role of the last Soviet leader is examined more fully in my *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Claims have also been made for the importance of the part played by President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, but Reagan elicited no positive change in the Soviet Union from the first three of the four Soviet leaders with whom he overlapped. Things changed only after Gorbachev came to power. The pope helped to inspire the rise of Solidarity, but was powerless to prevent the imposition of martial law in December 1981, which outlawed the organisation. It re-emerged as a serious force within Polish society only three years after the launch of the Soviet *perestroika* in 1985 – the reform of the system that by 1988 was turning into fundamental transformation.

Economists, unsurprisingly, emphasise the declining growth rates, technological lag and general inefficiency of the Communist economic system as the decisive factors in bringing the regimes down. That argument is to be found both in the work of the British economist Philip Hanson (*The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy*, Pearson, 2003) and that of the Russian acting prime minister who presided over the leap to market prices in 1992, the late Yegor Gaidar (*Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*, Brookings, 2007). Relative economic failure is seen as just one of the long-term reasons for the demise of most Communist states by the authors of four recent histories of Communism worldwide – three substantial tomes by Oxford scholars: Robert Service’s *Comrades. Communism: A World History* (Macmillan, 2007); David Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (Allen Lane, 2009); my own *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Bodley Head, 2009); and in Leslie Holmes’s masterpiece of concision, *Communism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009). In fact, it was not so much economic crisis that forced reform as reform which created political crisis.

The kind of radical reform which Gorbachev launched was a political choice. It had profound consequences, both intended and unintended. The sophisticated array of rewards and sanctions under Communism provided means other than liberalising reform of controlling their societies. It takes more than budgetary deficits and a declining rate of economic growth to bring down highly authoritarian regimes. Nothing, it turned out, was more important in determining when Communism ended in Europe than the support for fresh thinking of the person wielding more institutional power than anyone else in the entire Soviet bloc.

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