

Rethinking Soviet Communism

Peter Shearman

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Rethinking Soviet Communism

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For my sons, Peter and Michael

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Foreword

Students of international affairs coming to intellectual maturity over the last few years have experienced a world so profoundly different from that in which the author of this book and the writer of this Foreword grew up, that it sometimes feels as if they (and we) have lived almost totally different lives on almost completely different planets. For 'us' of course the existence of the Soviet Union and an ongoing Cold War between two superpowers locked in an apparently permanent struggle that stretched from the heart of Europe to the paddy fields of South East Asia seemed entirely normal. This reality in turn determined the way we understood the world, the political choices we were then forced to make in that world, and more directly what we were actually taught about the world in our universities. Indeed, one of the most important academic fields back then was 'Sovietology' a branch of nearly everything else whose primary function at the end of the day was to understand the USSR ('know the enemy') and try and explain what it was up to. As I wrote many years ago, the conflict between what some liked to term 'actually existing socialism', and others the 'free world', had so insinuated itself into the DNA of the West that we could almost think of the Cold War as being the most important relationship in all our lives.

But not only that. A very large part of what passed for International Relations after the Second World War was very directly influenced by the reality of the Cold War. Indeed, as Peter Shearman so tellingly reveals in his panoramic study, one of the more obvious reasons why the discipline of IR failed to see the end of the Cold War coming was precisely because many of its key practitioners had forged a set of ideas which appeared to provide an intellectual rationale for it. Few may like to be reminded of the fact now, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the most influential writer on IR—the very great Ken Waltz—made part of his reputation in the 1960s by suggesting a direct link between global stability and

bipolarity. Twenty years on and one of the most distinguished international historians of the time—John Lewis Gaddis—was making the equally strong case that instead of thinking of the Cold War in terms of the dangers it posed, we should, he felt, be focusing on it as having created what he termed a ‘long peace’; and though he did not make the point explicitly, there was every reason to think, possibly hope, that this peace order would go on for a very long time to come.

But the wider debate about the Cold War was premised on something else: namely the continued existence of a very special kind of state opposed to the world capitalist order and driven, according to conventional western wisdom, by an urge to expand. Now whether the sources of Soviet expansion flowed from its ideology, its history, its geography, or an insecurity caused by the competition with a more powerful American rival mattered very little. What mattered was that the USSR would continue to remain an outsider power in a divided world. That said, the impact it was to have on the world throughout the seventy-five years of its existence was absolutely immense. From the rise of fascism in the inter-war years, through the way the Second World War began in 1939 and ended in 1945, and on to the global competition that so shaped the post-war world, the USSR was in many ways the axis around which the world pivoted. Indeed, it is one of the many strengths of Peter Shearman’s study that he is able to show in vivid detail the impact that the Soviet communist experiment was to have on the twentieth century; an era ‘in which world politics’ according to Shearman ‘were in large part determined by events that took place in the former Soviet Union after 1917 when the Bolsheviks set about creating an alternative system to capitalism’. Moreover, even after it had passed from the stage of history as it finally did in 1991, it left a very powerful legacy behind it, not only in Russia itself but across the globe from China—still ruled by a Communist Party formed in the early Soviet years—through to Afghanistan where a disastrous Soviet decision to intervene in that country in December 1979 not only caused such grief to the country itself, but set off a series of catastrophic events that led, over time, to a terrorist attack in 2001, one that changed the United States and the international order for ever.

There is every need therefore for students today to return to the past and with Peter Shearman’s help, to rethink the Soviet experiment—not just because it is an interesting story in its own

right, or because they need to reclaim the history of the twentieth century. But rather because so much of their own lives—whether they think about it or not—has been shaped by the fall-out of what finally and unexpectedly happened to the Soviet system of power between 1989 and 1991.

Professor Michael Cox
General Editor
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List of Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Cheka	Soviet Emergency Committee for Internal Security, forerunner of the KGB
CFM	Committee of Foreign Ministers
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
Cominform	Communist Information Bureau
Comintern	Communist International
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPRF	Communist Party of the Russian Federation
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States
FNLA	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IR	International Relations (the academic discipline of)
KAPD	Communist Workers Party of Germany
KGB	Committee of State Security
KOMSOMOL	The All-Union Leninist Young Communist League
LAI	League against Imperialism
LDPR	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEP	New Economic Policy

NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NIC	Newly Industrialised Countries
NJM	New Jewel Movement
NSC	National Security Council
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRUC	Party of Russian Unity and Accord
RSDLP	Russian Social Democratic Labour Party
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
SPD	German Social Democratic Party
TFC	Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation
UNITA	National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UR	United Russia
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	Warsaw Treaty Organization

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Introduction

This book reassesses the impact that the Soviet communist experiment had during its lifetime and its continuing influence today. World politics in the twentieth century were in large part determined by events that took place in the former Soviet Union after 1917 when the Bolsheviks set about creating an alternative system to capitalism. The ensuing long era of contestation between the Soviet Union and the West finally came to an end with the demise of communism as a powerful alternative ideology in the 1980s, and the ensuing unravelling of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. The influence of the October Revolution in 1917 was pervasive, and although its immediate impact on the subjects of the former Russian Empire was dramatic, the revolution also had profound consequences in wider global politics. Communism was to become the most influential cross-border idea in modern history to challenge both liberal democracy and the organization of world politics.

The consequences of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet experience are still with us today. It is not possible to fully understand, for example, the current issues in Southwest Asia without an appreciation of the Soviet impact in that region, including the war in Afghanistan. The same holds true for the international politics of Central Europe and the former Soviet territories in the Caucasus, including the short war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, and in 2014 the conflict over the future of Ukraine.

The starting point for this book is the end point of the Cold War. It will be argued that the failure of scholars, both in Soviet Studies and International Relations (IR), to predict the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the accompanying end of the Cold War reflects a failure in their analyses to pay sufficient attention to the twin forces of communism and nationalism. The twentieth century was an ideological age, when religion gave way to secular ideational belief systems that would provide meaning