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## The un-American way of life

A controversial new history of Communism suggests that most everything we think we know about it is wrong

By Andrew O'Hehir

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Most adults now living were born during the Cold War, a 45-year standoff between competing political and economic systems that threatened civilization with nuclear annihilation and asked virtually every human being on earth to pick a side. One of those systems was called Communism, and it cast such a long, dark shadow across the 20th century that it's amazing to reflect how thoroughly it has vanished from the scene and how poorly its history is understood.

Genuine support for Communism -- meaning the Marxist-Leninist governing ideology of the Soviet Union and its allies, as distinct from various flavors of socialism or social democracy -- was minimal in the Western world, despite the United States government's best efforts to uncover it. But you didn't have to endorse Communism to be fascinated by it. Simply the existence of that alternate model, with its claim of scientific inevitability and its alleged utopian aims, had a bizarre, distorting effect on political discourse clear across the ideological spectrum.

Significant sectors of the left were paralyzed by Communism, unwilling or unable to criticize regimes (no matter how nightmarish and autocratic) that nominated themselves as the enemies of capitalism and imperialism and the champions of third-world revolution. Right-wingers became hysterically obsessed by it, finding a creeping Red stain in Hollywood movies, pop music and abstract art (and never realizing how much they were mirroring the paranoia of the Soviet commissars). Eager to prove they weren't closet pinkos, the mainstream liberals of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations launched a disastrous series of overt and covert anti-Communist proxy wars, whose echoes continue to reverberate today. (Osama bin Laden, after all, was a nasty little piece of Cold War blowback.)

Academics pumped out scholarly treatises on the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism by the yard, and debated the Soviet system's merits and flaws feverishly. Now all those copies of "The Lenin Anthology" and Leszek Kolakowski's "Main Currents in Marxism" are moldering in the garages of former grad students, and our collective memory of the great 20th-century struggle between capitalism and Communism is a series of clichés and blurry newsreel images: Stalin and FDR guffawing as they carve up the postwar world, Kennedy and Khrushchev daring each other to push the button, Soviet tanks rumbling through the streets of Prague, Reagan instructing Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall!"

Archie Brown's whopping study, "The Rise and Fall of Communism," which is modest in tone but

comprehensive in scholarship, marks an important effort to dig past those iconic stereotypes and painful memories and figure out what the hell was going on in that 75-year-long failed experiment called Communism. This is still an exceptionally difficult subject for Americans to confront with any clarity, I think. Our political life remains haunted in peculiar ways by the specter of Communism, which has become (to mix metaphors) an all-purpose ideological cudgel to use against one's enemies.

In some quarters, President Obama is denounced as a Leninist for suggesting tepid social-democratic reforms to the healthcare system (which come nowhere near the government-administered programs of Canada or Western Europe). To other critics, Obama is merely a spineless replica of a Cold War liberal, unable or unwilling to stand tall against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei the way Reagan did against the Soviet Union. Or, that is, the way he did in their mythical version of the story.

As Brown sees it, Reagan definitely played a role in the dissolution of Communism, but not the role most Americans think. Brown describes Reagan's confrontational first-term cowboy act, and his "evil empire" rhetoric, as almost entirely destructive, heightening tensions and strengthening the resolve of Kremlin hard-liners. It was in Reagan's second term, under the guidance of his pragmatic secretary of state, George Shultz, that he strolled amicably through Red Square with Mikhail Gorbachev, and negotiated a series of arms-control agreements that ended the threat of nuclear war in Europe.

One might summarize the central argument of Brown's sweeping tome this way: Communism meant different things to different people in different contexts, but the very things that made it successful, at least for a while, also paved the way for its destruction. A professor emeritus at Oxford and perhaps Britain's most prestigious Sovietologist, Brown has crafted a readable and judicious account of Communist history, from its theoretical beginnings in 19th-century Europe to its practical collapse at the end of the 1980s, that is both controversial and commonsensical.

Having served as an informal advisor to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during a crucial period in the early 1980s, Brown has anti-Communist bona fides, and does not pretend to be a neutral observer. But given the immense sweep of time, ideology and geography he strives to cover in 600-odd pages -- as Brown observes, almost every one of his chapters could be a book on its own -- "The Rise and Fall of Communism" is a work of considerable delicacy and nuance.

Brown draws an important distinction between upper-case "Communism," to describe states governed by Marxist-Leninist political parties, and lower-case "communism," to describe the classless future utopia imagined by Marx, which no such state ever claimed to have reached. Furthermore, although those countries typically called themselves "socialist," Brown avoids the term. For one thing, Lenin and his followers were trying to steal the word away from the Western social-democratic tradition, which has produced elected leaders in Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Australia and elsewhere. There is an evolutionary relationship between Western socialism and Soviet Communism, to be sure, but their bitter split predates the Russian Revolution, and many of Communism's sharpest critics have been socialists. It is no more meaningful to say that Stalin and George Orwell were both socialists than to observe that Martin Luther King Jr. and George Wallace were both Christians.

There is none of the jingoistic cheerleading in Brown's book that you'd get from an American neocon. He firmly believes that constructive engagement with the Communist world was morally and strategically superior to tough talk and saber-rattling. In fact, between the lines you can read an account of his influence: In 1983 Brown delivered a paper at Chequers, the prime minister's private retreat, that convinced Thatcher to talk directly to the Soviet leadership. In turn, she convinced her good friend Reagan to follow suit. Brown does not see all Communist regimes as identical or uniformly totalitarian -- the notorious police state of East Germany was vastly different from the relative tolerance and openness of Communist Hungary -- and believes they contained the possibility for genuine reform. Indeed, he points out that Gorbachev *did* reform Communism

from within, before deciding to abandon it entirely.

As many anecdotes Brown lifts from recently opened Communist archives reveal, leading officials in the Soviet bloc were keenly concerned with events and perceptions in the outside world. To most ordinary people in the West -- and to many of our politicians, who ought to have known better -- the Soviet bloc looked like an implacable monolith in which a mysterious elite ruled over the terrorized and/or brainwashed masses. Men inside the Kremlin and other centers of Communist power, on the other hand, knew that their own populations were increasingly restive and saw the wealth and might of the "bourgeois democracies" arrayed against them. They understood that their hold on the reins of power was tenuous and contingent.

Brown focuses tightly on a series of factual historical questions as he hopscotches from the Soviet Union and its satellite states through Mao Zedong's China, Fidel Castro's Cuba, Pol Pot's Cambodia and other epiphenomena of international Communism. He pays some attention to significant non-ruling Communist parties -- especially the big ones in Italy, Spain and South Africa -- but his principal concern is the 16 nations that at one time or another were ruled by a Marxist-Leninist party recognized as such by the Soviet Union.

His central questions are these: How and why did Communists come to power in so many different places? How did their authoritarian and manifestly unpopular regimes hold onto power for so long? And why did most of them collapse so abruptly? He also addresses, at the end of the book, what might be called the question of Communist hangover: How have self-described Communist regimes endured in Cuba, North Korea and (at least nominally) China, long after the collapse of the international movement that once sustained them?

For Brown, a Communist system had three pairs of identifying characteristics, all of which have their origins in Lenin's ideology and philosophy. In the political realm, a monopoly of power was held by one party, with most of the power concentrated at the top, and that party operated through the process Lenin called "democratic centralism." That was supposed to mean that open discussion could precede decision-making, which was then administered with unanimity and iron discipline. It usually meant, of course, that decisions were handed down from a dictator or a small circle of oligarchs, and were neither discussed nor questioned. In the economic realm, the state controlled the means of production, and a command economy, rather than a market economy, predominated. In the ideological realm, the declared aim of building communism -- for Marx, the classless, stateless final stage of human development -- was the state's "ultimate, legitimizing goal," and the state belonged to an international Communist movement aimed at moving the whole world toward that future society.

Communism remained a politically effective force as long as these three pillars worked to support each other. While the command economy was notoriously bad at delivering consumer goods and the one-party state offered little room for civil rights or liberties, they did deliver improved healthcare and education and widespread social mobility, along with rapid industrial progress. As long as at least some people in a society truly believed that they were part of a historic and inevitable shift away from capitalism toward something better, the hardships seemed to be worth it. Brown suggests that many people in Communist societies, including their leaders, did believe that until at least the 1960s.

Yet as people in such societies became healthier and better educated, they began to wonder about the massive social costs that "socialist progress" required in the best of times, not to mention the famine, starvation and murder it occasioned at others. They wondered about the police state the ruling party always seemed to require to maintain order, about the fantastical future that seemed to be getting no closer and about the non-Communist world, where higher living standards and greater political and personal freedom seemed to go hand in hand.

According to Brown, Nikita Khrushchev -- probably the last Soviet leader who believed in the future promise of small-C communism -- used to tell a joke in which a party apparatchik delivers a talk at a collective farm deep in the Russian countryside. "Comrades, some of you may doubt that we will ever live under communism,"

he intones, "but I tell you it lies just beyond the horizon!" An aged peasant sticks up his hand and says, "Comrade Lecturer, what is the horizon?" The lecturer says, "I am glad you asked that, Venerable Comrade. The horizon is the imaginary line where the land meets the sky, which has the unique property of always moving further away as you approach it." The aged peasant replies, "Thank you, Comrade Lecturer. Now I understand completely."

Brown has read virtually every available scholarly work published about the Communist era in either English or Russian, and has studied the now-declassified Soviet archives extensively. Arguably he offers nothing startling or new on such well-rehearsed topics as the October Revolution, the brilliant and ruthless figures of Lenin and Trotsky, and the Stalinist reign of terror that followed. But his arguments are balanced and clear. One doesn't have to excuse the brutality and bloodshed of Lenin's revolutionary regime, for instance, to grasp that he would have been horrified by Stalin's paranoid and murderous expansion of it.

When Brown turns to the long endgame of the Communist era, from Khrushchev's 1956 revelations about Stalin to the long, slow percolation of dissent under Brezhnev and the sudden explosion of perestroika, his account is frequently mesmerizing and leavened with colorful anecdotes. He offers considerable new insight into what leading figures within the Communist bloc were saying and thinking at such critical junctures as the Cuban missile crisis, the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Solidarity uprising in Poland during the early '80s. In all three of those cases, the Soviet leadership tried to walk a fine line invisible to outsiders. They could feel their empire slipping away and sought to preserve it, while also trying to stave off an intra-Kremlin coup by Stalinist hard-liners.

Brown does not believe that Soviet Communism was fated to die because of its economic failures or its autocratic character, nor does he think it was brought down by the arms race or Reagan's muscular rhetoric. If anything, he is a charmingly old-fashioned historian who sees the slow process of social change embodied in individual personalities. He suggests that if either Yuri Andropov or Konstantin Chernenko -- Gorbachev's short-lived predecessors -- had survived a few more years, or if the ruling Politburo had elected *any other member* as general secretary after Chernenko's death in March 1985, recent history might look very different. Furthermore, if the Politburo members had understood Gorbachev's thinking a little better, they would certainly not have chosen him.

Gorbachev's life experience and philosophy, Brown argues, gave him a mental flexibility and imagination that were unique among leading Communists. He began as leader with the genuine aim of reforming the one-party state, largely by relaxing censorship and encouraging open dialogue. Some of his fellow Communists were ready for this, but few were prepared for Gorbachev's rapid evolution into a social democrat. By 1989 he had decided that it was too late to save Communist rule, and abruptly announced that the party would abandon its "leading role" in society and hold free elections.

This launched a process Gorbachev could no longer control, which included an explosion of nationalist feeling in Russia and the other Soviet republics and the unexpected emergence of a one-time Moscow Communist boss named Boris Yeltsin. In this exciting, pell-mell experiment in democracy -- Brown says 100 million Soviet citizens watched the early legislative sessions on TV -- Gorbachev hoped to preserve the Soviet state, or most of it, while fundamentally changing its character. After the failed putsch by hard-line Communists late in 1991, that was no longer possible. But Brown is always cautious about hindsight, and says only that the question of whether the Soviet breakup could have been avoided is "unanswered and unanswerable."

Brown is a big believer in the idea that history is not carved in stone. If Czechoslovakia had been allowed to become a social-democratic state in 1968, as both its citizens and its Communist leaders wanted, the Cold War might have ended 20 years earlier than it did. On the other hand, if Gorbachev had been ousted by the Politburo in early 1989 and Soviet tanks sent into Poland (as urged by Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu) then the Communist states might not have toppled one after another. As Brown explains it, the now-legendary opening

of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, was an accident rather than a policy decision, the result of a careless remark made to Tom Brokaw by a spokesman for the East German Politburo.

One thing was not a historical fluke or accident, though: the fact that a political system based on some half-baked utopian musing by Marx and Engels, and their bogus claims of scientific certainty, was not going to work out well for anybody. There's room for argument about whether it had to turn out quite as badly as it did, and plenty of room for discussing the continuing validity of Marx's insights into capitalism. But there's no denying that the works of a philosopher who championed human creativity became the basis for a social system devoted to crushing it. It's the platonic ideal of historical irony, to which other historical ironies can only aspire, and suggests some very dark possibilities about human nature.

In much of the world, the term "socialism" has been poisoned by its association with Soviet-style Communism; in the United States, it is virtually a term of hate speech. But as Brown (who is certainly no socialist) makes clear, it was socialists who saw the dangers of Communism first and most clearly. In 1918, at the dawn of the Soviet era, Karl Kautsky, who had personally known Marx and Engels in his youth, wrote a diatribe against Lenin's use of the vague Marxist term "dictatorship of the proletariat."

Kautsky insisted it had been meant metaphorically, and that genuine class struggle presupposed genuine democracy. The so-called dictatorship of the proletariat "always leads to the dictatorship of a single man, or of a small knot of leaders" and to a situation where ordinary people "only become instruments for carrying out orders."

Although Lenin was trying to defend the Soviet Union against very real enemies within and without, he took time out to bang out an angry broadside against "the despicable renegade Kautsky," which suggests how much the criticism stung. (With characteristic directness, he described his newborn state as "a machine for the suppression of the bourgeoisie.") Lenin was too intelligent not to understand that there were real dangers in conflating the dictatorship of the proletariat with the dictatorship of those who claimed to know what was best for the proletariat, but he had long since convinced himself that the imaginary ends justified the brutal means. Seventy years later, the last leader of Lenin's party and Lenin's state would decide that Kautsky had been right all along.

**-- By Andrew O'Hehir**

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