

# **TO OVERTHROW THE WORLD: THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF COMMUNISM**

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Unlike the cats grilled by the illegals invited by our rulers to invade once-decent towns all over America, Communism has nine lives, or more. Why is it that Communism, the most destructive and evil ideology in the history of mankind, always takes a licking and keeps on ticking? The short answer is that Communism is merely one branch of the Left tree, infinitely seductive because it appeals to our basest instincts, and until that tree is felled like Boniface's oak, Communism and its siblings will continue their destruction. To arm ourselves to achieve that goal, it is very helpful to understand Communism. And there is no better way to gain this essential knowledge than with Sean McMeekin's latest book.

*To Overthrow the World* is a compelling and competent survey of Communism. It even has the feel of a class in Communism, which is perhaps not surprising, given that McMeekin is a university professor, at Bard College. Unfortunately, however, I suspect it will not find the wide audience it deserves. Very few college students will read it, and none as assigned reading. Rather, those general readers who have read McMeekin's other excellent books will read it. They should, and they will benefit, especially when they realize what I, at least, read as McMeekin's purpose, about which he is not transparent, but he is deliberate—to use the history of Communism to warn us that far from dying in 1991, it has instead conquered much of the West.

What McMeekin first explores, however, is how Communism came to be so widespread in the twentieth century. Given that it was not “preordained by some Hegelian-Marxist law of history, however much Karl Marx and his acolytes would have wished it so,” what were the actual drivers of its spread? The very short answer is war—Communism, as seductive as its claims were, especially before the disasters created by it, only ever grabbed power as the result of grievous wounds in a country's social fabric that were created by losing a war, often with the help of foreign Communist armies imposing the ideology on prostrate populations.

We begin with theory, Part I of the book. The iron core of Communist theory is the demand for forced total equality, material and social. McMeekin notes that this line of thought, as analysis if not as recommendation, traces back at least as far as Plato. In the ancient world, however, equality as a goal—moral, economic, social, or political—had zero traction. It was only with the rise of Christianity that the Christian doctrine of the equality of believers, that is, their equal standing before God combined with His demands for charity previously completely unknown in the ancient world, began to sometimes be twisted into demands for forced social and political equality among citizens, in a distortion of the Christian message. (In fact, Christianity has always condemned envy, the prime driver of demands for such undesirable equality.) And even so, only very rarely was this Christian heresy of political and social equality relevant to political action, most spectacularly in the brief sixteenth-century Anabaptist takeover of the German city of Münster.

But with the so-called Enlightenment, which secularized what Christians regarded as a future eschatological happening, forced equality became a present-day political demand, and one of formidable force, because it fed into and was fed by the powerful and universal human vice of envy. Rousseau was the most forward-thinking proponent of this line of thought, even if he was not quite yet a “full” Communist, because he allowed for private property, to the extent it did not frustrate the general will. Envy as the driving force of politics was reified in the French Revolution, which used terror in the name of the general will to accomplish equality, meaning the transfer of both tangible and intangible goods to those who had seized power (liberty and fraternity being made respectively secondary and irrelevant).

That nasty revolution was soon enough put down by more practical and reality-based men. Its ideas lived on, however, spreading like an underground fungus throughout every Western society. McMeekin profiles men such as François-Noël Babeuf, executed in 1797 for sedition, who fomented the “Conspiracy of Equals,” including publishing a manifesto which contained many elements of Karl Marx’s thought several decades later. Through the first half of the nineteenth century various eccentric men, such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, funded (unsuccessful) voluntary living arrangements focused on radical equality,

but none of these involved or suggested seizing state power. The theory of Communism proper only began with Marx.

McMeekin offers a thorough précis of Marx's life and works, including, most importantly, the *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848 (noting, in a choice turn of words, that Marx wrote "in the grand and wholly unsourced style of Hegelian history-writing"). Marx, a pithy, colorful, and original writer, if opaque in his longer works, offered ten condensed demands, an "astonishingly radical and authoritarian program," all of which revolved around forcing equality upon the people of a nation. The *Manifesto* might not have gotten as much traction as it did, except for the wave of European revolutions that took place in 1848 (not inspired by the *Manifesto*, to be sure, but rather largely by nationalism, combined with Left ideology to some degree in some places). Those revolutions were put down, but Marx's ideas lived on, and gave new nourishment to the Left at a time when change was in the air and the fool's gold promised by the Enlightenment seemed real. Marx, an excellent organizer, himself established the First International, in 1864, to spread his new gospel, with definite, if mixed, success.

Communism was only one branch of the spreading Left fungus, which notably also included anarchism, exemplified by Mikhail Bakunin, and the syndicalism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The nineteenth-century Left was not a unity, certainly, even if their goals were the same at their core. For the past two hundred years, the twin trunks of the Left tree, what defines the Left, have been equality, the primary focus of the Communists, and emancipation from unchosen bonds, the secondary focus of the Communists, but the primary focus of other brands of Left thought. Bakunin, no fool, disliked the very obvious authoritarian streak in Marx's thought, and saw clearly that Marx's ideas meant not actual equality but rather a new ruling class, of intellectuals claiming to speak for the proletariat, which would be "the most oppressive, offensive, and contemptuous kind in the world." Such splits among the Left are interesting to examine, because they may shed light on how to permanently defeat the Left—most obviously, through a strategy of divide and conquer, if enough will can be brought to bear.

This commonality among all Left efforts raises the obvious question—if under the hood the Left is the same in every way that matters, why does the Left historically fight endlessly over doctrine, purging from

their sub-groupings those deemed heretics? The history of Communism, after all, is consumed in large part with such purges and quests for doctrinal purity, beginning very early in Marx's career, and such splits also characterized the French revolutionaries of 1789. The easy answer is power—there is only so much power to go around, and men consumed by ideology strongly desire power, which can be achieved most certainly by welding men together with a common belief that can be contrasted to unbelievers, who can be consigned to the outer darkness. There is probably more to it, however, including offering sharply-defined meaning to the rootless through a personal belief that one has found the exact right path. The modern Left has, unfortunately, mostly overcome this problem, which was very damaging to the Left up until the supposed fall of Communism in the late twentieth century.

Back to history. Marx died in 1883, having dissolved the First International in 1876, because his doctrine was threatened with dilution, and he saw purity of doctrine as more important than immediate application. His heirs created the Second International, in 1889, excluding other Left groups, and they achieved considerable success in creating a united Communist movement across Western Europe. That success was ended with World War I, because most Communists chose nationalism over Communism. What rescued Communism was Vladimir Lenin, whose luck, combined with the chaos in Russia caused by the ultimate failure of Russian imperial system, created the first Communist state.

To achieve his ends, Lenin pushed "revolutionary defeatism," the idea that only through manipulating a civil war could Communism be imposed on Russia (hence his famous line, "the worse, the better"). The best vehicle for this was to "turn the armies Red," and that he proceeded to do with the Russians. (McMeekin is the author of a number of books about this period, including *The Russian Revolution* and a biography of Willy Münzenberg, an important German Communist.) The February Revolution of 1917, in which the Tsar abdicated, had no connection to Lenin's efforts, but the chaos allowed Lenin, sent back to Russia by the Germans and funded with the modern equivalent of more than a billion dollars in gold, to execute his plans. Using various forms of propaganda, he succeeded in undermining Russian military morale, aiming to collapse the new government through military failure. Alexander Kerensky

should have executed Lenin, but instead unwisely decided that he had no enemies on the Left, only on the Right, and the Bolsheviks seized total power in October.

All this is well-covered history. Part II, "Communism in Practice," should also be well-covered history, but for most people today is largely obscure. This is not an accident, because covering up the ongoing crimes of Communism has been a main goal of Left historians for more than a century, a problem that has gotten worse over the past fifty years as the Left has excised from the history profession anyone who is not Left.

The Bolsheviks immediately embarked on a program of terror in pursuit of their aims. Confiscation of wealth and the usual random terror were the top items on the agenda, but those were quickly superseded by the need for mere survival against various enemies coalescing against their successful coup. In the first two months, the Bolsheviks killed fifteen thousand civilian "enemies of the people," which as McMeekin notes was "more than twice the total number of prisoners of all kinds executed [after judicial process] in the century of tsarist rule before 1917." But even after Germany collapsed in 1918 and could no longer fund Lenin (the gap was partially filled by millions of tons of food being sent by the American Relief Administration, run by Herbert Hoover), he was able to triumph over his enemies, including the White armies. Thus, the Bolsheviks were able to rule as they wished—forbidding private enterprise, abolishing money, dissolving the family and "bourgeois morality" through easy divorce and free abortion, and so forth, all as Marx had written.

What Lenin wanted most of all, and fully expected, was a wave of Communist triumph across Europe. At first, for a very brief moment, this appeared to be happening—for example, in Germany and in Hungary (where the 1919 Red Terror, led by Béla Kun, is something on which I am writing a long separate article). (Somewhat to my surprise, McMeekin does not mention the 1918 Finnish Civil War at all.) Very soon, however, all these Communist attempts to impose a Left regime outside of Russia failed completely, showing that even chaos and military defeat did not inevitably lead to Communist success. Nonetheless, Lenin pressed on, creating the Third International to coordinate Communist action across the globe, which the Soviet Union did through that vehicle for decades thereafter, forcing conformity among all the Communist parties of

Europe (and America), notably by casting other left-wing parties as enemies no different than the “fascists” and purging any person not wholly subservient to Moscow (while also providing the carrot of funding from Moscow).

We then follow the ups and downs of Communism throughout the twentieth century, ranging from Lenin’s New Economic Policy to wave after wave of terror, inside and outside the Party. We touch on the Spanish Civil War and examine the run-up to World War II. In these years, Communism was not seen by Americans, or at least by those in charge of America, as a much of a threat, because the Left was generally in the ascendant. McMeekin notes that the “period of high Stalinism, c. 1928–1938, also marked a peak in Communist prestige internationally judged on almost any criterion.” Most useful to Stalin was Western fear of Adolf Hitler and a resurgent Germany; McMeekin wrote a whole book, *Stalin’s War*, about this, including the massive (and unvoted-on) support Franklin Roosevelt and his Communist-riddled administration shoveled onto Stalin’s plate, without any payment and without any attempt to require Stalin to stop killing his own people. McMeekin observes without comment that during the war, “the number of Red Army soldiers shot by their own side alone (about 300,000) . . . was more than the entire toll of British troops who perished at enemy hands in the course of the war.”

In postwar Europe, despite the devastation, Communism failed to win any power in a single free vote. Almost nobody wanted Communism when given a choice; the few that did had mostly been traitors for years (a phenomenon not confined to Europe; we had Alger Hiss and many others). But Communism still expanded, coterminous with the Red Army. All of Eastern Europe, and much of Central Europe, fell under Communist tyranny and terror. Millions were tortured, imprisoned, or killed, and often all three. I doubt if any of this is today covered in most schools and universities, except by specialists. McMeekin also offers a detailed examination of Communism’s postwar spread outside of Europe, greatly assisted by American fecklessness and by traitors, knowing and unknowing, within the American government, beginning with China and ending with Pol Pot.

The period of the greatest evils of European communism lasted until the late 1950s—that is, until a few years after the death of Stalin in 1953.

Restive populations in Central Europe—first the Germans; then the Poles; and most spectacularly the Hungarians, gave vent to their hatred for Communism and the Communist systems that had been forced on them by the Red Army. (I am currently also writing a long piece on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, so this is very much on my mind.) At the same time, however, Communism expanded in the Third World, taking on various forms, but resulting in the terror and mass killing that nearly always accompanies any Left, Communist or other, ascension to total power. “It was in the years of the post-Tet slow-motion US disaster in Vietnam, from 1968 to 1975, that Soviet global influence and the popularity of the Communist cause likely peaked.” That influence and popularity had waned among intellectuals ever since Khrushchev denounced Stalin; Pol Pot’s genocidal mania in Cambodia turned general world opinion more sharply against Communism. (Although, interestingly, McMeekin correctly points out that one of the very few places where mass killing did not occur after a Communist takeover was—Vietnam. In fact the Vietnamese Communists were the ones who insisted on ending Pol Pot’s reign of terror, who had embarrassed his original sponsor, the Chinese.)

I will say in passing that this book could have used a better editor. Not in the writing, which as always with McMeekin is vivid and fluid. Rather, in double-checking the facts. For example, he says that the Soviet offensive against the Hungarians ending the 1956 Revolution cost the lives of “15,000 Soviet troops and advisors.” I knew this was false, so I checked the work footnoted (William Taubman’s *Khrushchev*). It says 1,500, ten times fewer. And even that is an overstatement (as is Taubman’s casual and uncited claim, also repeated by McMeekin, that 20,000 Hungarians were killed in the same offensive; actually, it was more like three or four thousand). A few other infelicities and errors occur, as well, but none are debilitating, just a bit jarring.

We then return to Eurasia, and the period of Communist sclerosis, the 1970s and 1980s. Competition was less in the military realm and more in (drug-fueled) athletic competition and in astroturfed propaganda campaigns in the West, such as the wholly Communist-funded “nuclear freeze” movement. Communist governments made much-needed money by “selling Germans and Jews”; that is, by selling exit permits for individuals in groups who had friends abroad who could pay for their release from Communism. Unrest reared its head intermittently,

notably in Poland in the early 1980s, and was again restrained from the Soviet center, but without the violence of 1956. The Eastern Bloc fell ever further behind economically, and became perilously dependent on loans from the West (something well-covered in Stephen Kotkin's *Armageddon Averted*). Nonetheless, the Soviets decided to invade Afghanistan to prop up their client regime in Kabul, even though Yuri Andropov, then chairman of the KGB and later general secretary of the Party, who had also played a crucial role in 1956 in Hungary and was the best informed of the top Communists about the actual state of the world, warned against it. This was a mistake, not only because the Communists were unable to defeat the Afghans, but because the still-remaining not-inconsiderable attraction of Communism in the Third World, and in the West, painstakingly rebuilt for more than a decade, evaporated.

Mikhail Gorbachev, a true believer, something (contrary to myth) all the top Communists in the Eastern Bloc remained until the end, tried to reform Soviet Communism, and succeeded only in destroying it. Popular protests swept the Soviet satellites, and this time the Soviets did nothing, so the power of Communism collapsed. If there is a thesis to this book, it is that Communism, always and everywhere, can only come to power and stay in power by the sword, and if that sword rusts fast in its scabbard, Communism is doomed. And so ended Communism in Europe and European Eurasia. The Chinese, meanwhile, did not make Gorbachev's mistakes, and remade their economy without either weakening the Party or (officially) watering down Communism. Today China outclasses the United States on many measures, and probably outclasses us in other measures that are less obvious but more meaningful (for example, given that huge swathes of America's GDP are completely fake, the Chinese economy is likely vastly more productive than ours, and the Chinese military, while on paper weaker than ours, is probably much more able to win any actual war the Chinese are likely to fight against us).

Finally, only in the Epilogue, and only briefly, does McMeekin touch on the second rise of Communism heralded by the subtitle of the book. Here, we encounter esotericism, because it becomes apparent that what McMeekin means is not that, somewhere in the world, Communism is regaining attractiveness to intellectuals, perhaps beginning another turn of the cycle of the past hundred years. Nor does he really mean



that China still flies the Red flag. No, he means that we, the peoples and nations of the West, have been taken over by Communism. We have met the enemy, and he is us—or rather, he is our rulers.

He does not openly say anything quite so salty, but the conclusion is inescapable from what he does say. McMeekin summarizes: “What made the USSR ‘Communist’ is the same things that define the current governments of China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba: rule by a single-party dictatorship that allows no legal opposition parties, that claims to direct and control the entire economy, that blankets society with all-encompassing rules and regulations, and that hectors, monitors, and surveils the people in whose name it claims to rule in minute detail.” He does imply that China is the relevant prime example about the “new rise” of Communism. But China is not newly Communist (and in fact not very Communist at all in many ways, whatever lip service its rulers may pay to their past) and not rising, but largely on top. And it makes exactly zero effort to spread its ideology, Communist or otherwise, to those very many countries over which it has been steadily gaining influence. The reader is therefore a little confused as to what is going on here.

McMeekin is a very smart man, and none of this is accidental. Any reader informed by reality and not in the grip of Left ideology will immediately read McMeekin’s definition of Communism and conclude that, except perhaps for direction and control of the entire economy, it fits most of Europe and all of America, at this very moment. The author dances around this veiled conclusion. He mentions how the government surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden, as well as that exposed by Elon Musk after he bought Twitter, show how the “US security state” acts in a way largely indistinguishable from present-day Chinese Communism. Making an argument more exhaustively developed last year by N. S. Lyons, he notes that “Most of the Western world is now converging on a hybrid Chinese Communist model of statist governance and social life,” citing the massive state control imposed using the excuse of the Wuhan Plague, with violent force used against all opposition, and pointing out the increasing use of a social credit system and debanking of political enemies by the Regime.

And, finally, at the end of a very long book, his last sentences conclude with something verging on explicit recognition and condemnation:

“Americans have thus far been spared the cruder Communist injustice of ‘expropriation’ of their assets, and the horrors of Stalin- or Mao-style Gulag camps and state-induced famines. In the social and intellectual sphere, however, the echoes of Cultural Revolution-style Communist totalitarianism have become too powerful—and painful—to ignore. Because modern-day thought commissars often work in the private sector (or for companies aligned with state intelligence), these new Western forms of social control may be more insidious than the cruder methods of physical intimidation and violence deployed by the NKVD, the Stasi, and Mao’s Red Guards: many victims deprived of their jobs, funds, reputation, or basic civil rights may not even know who their accusers are. Far from dead, Communism as a governing template seems only to be getting started.”

What the reader concludes is that Communism is very much alive, but has been reabsorbed within the Left fungus, and then has emerged in fresh ways, under new branding. That is to say, the Left realized that its project could not ultimately be spread with a naked sword, but could be spread with a hidden poisoned dagger, used to murder countries secretly from within. This was the entire project of the Frankfurt School, whose filthy progeny and acolytes today dominate the intellectual and political classes throughout the West. The best explication of this process as tied to Communism directly is the one offered by Ryszard Legutko in *The Demon in Democracy*, which succinctly demonstrates how the ideology which rules today in America and most of Europe is simply a successor ideology with great similarity to Communism.

Moreover, to our great detriment, the Left in America has largely conquered its fissiparous tendencies, managing to coordinate through modern doctrines such as “intersectionality,” a fancy word for “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours, while we together steal from the productive members of society, and kill them when they are fully expropriated.” McMeekin sees this too, even if his language is more measured. He notes that “As long as people dream of brotherhood between men, of equal rights for women or for racial or ethnic minorities, or, in the current jargon, of ‘social justice,’ some version of Communism will retain broad popular appeal.” In other words, McMeekin, like me, denies any relevant distinction between Communism and the overarching Left project. They are merely the two faces of Janus.

Thus, we are left today with the irony that Communism, supposedly dead, did ultimately overthrow the world, and continues to do so. The necessary conclusion is that, whether we like it or not, the world must be overthrown again, but in a completely different direction, to destroy the poison of the Left. How that will be accomplished remains to be seen, but as chaos descends on the West, innumerable dangers and opportunities will arise. And if you have educated yourself by reading this book, you will be more able to create a better world for our children.