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Introduction

> It is, sometimes, these changes which are going on around us of which we are least aware.
>
> —MAYNARD KEYNES[1]

Why should anyone believe that Communism played a crucial role in the origins of World War II? The word scarcely appears in the index of standard works on the subject.

Yet the threat of revolution posed by the Bolsheviks, as the Communists were once better known, proved critical to the emergence of fascism. It was also a central consideration in the failure of states menaced by Hitler's Germany to unite against the immediate and very tangible threat he posed to their survival. Although brooding along the margins of Europe for more than two decades after the revolution with military power insufficient for offensive operations to endanger Central Europe, the Soviet Union nevertheless incarnated an impending threat to capitalism worldwide. Entire countries, including Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia, were all the more easily isolated, picked off one by one and then wiped off the map by Hitler because for each of them the dread of Communist rule ultimately proved greater than their fear of the Nazis. This makes more sense when it is borne in mind that whereas the menace from Eastern Europe—the Soviet Union—was well established by the mid-1930s, the scale and

depth of that looming from Central Europe—Nazi Germany—had yet to reveal itself in full.

The story therefore does not begin where it is usually assumed to, in the 1930s, though this is when it reaches its climax. It is also essential to understand its genesis from the 1920s. Indeed, the First World War (1914–18) had barely ended before the dangers pending for the postwar era became apparent. Delegates were already en route to Paris in January 1919 for the primary purpose of redrawing the maps of Europe and the Near East, when from London *The Times* issued an electrifying call to confront the "[d]anger of Bolshevist imperialism". "Of all problems before the Peace Conference", the leader page thundered, "none is quite so urgent as that of our relations with the new Imperialism of the Russian Bolshevists. And in none is delay so dangerous or so injurious to the well-being of our friends. The idea is very prevalent in this country that however pestilent Bolshevism may be, only Russians are the sufferers, and we should be well advised not to meet its troubles. Whatever truth there may ever have been in that view has evaporated. The present Russian government—and an appreciation of this fact is crucial to an understanding of our problem—is the most Imperialistically minded in Europe."[2]

But how was it that the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia could so rapidly threaten to undercut plans for postwar Europe? The answer was not hard to see. The Bolshevik creed—or Marxism-Leninism, as we would call it today—offered the most immediate, drastic solution to the social and economic deprivation not just of the working classes of the world, but also of the impoverished peasant. Conditions were ripe by 1918 when revolutionary propaganda spread like wildfire across the globe. In Europe, as the Swiss ambassador to France reported, "Everywhere there are disturbances, riots and convulsions."[3] And wherever one looked, popular discontent varied only in the degree of severity. The scale and intensity of modern conflict accelerated by industrialisation had imposed an immense and, in places, intolerable strain on the societies caught up in the First World War. Contiguous, multinational Leviathans—the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires—imploded under relentless bombardment and the economic and social strain of total war.

By comparison the democracies were far better off in their capacity to forge a national consensus. Yet they too found it possible to sustain a titanic struggle for survival only through making extravagant empty promises of social reform—in Britain "homes fit for heroes" that were never built—and of more egalitarian income distribution, delaying the inevitable moment when these promissory notes would fall due in the likelihood that the means for delivering on them would be insufficient to meet pressing demand. Liberals were rapidly transforming themselves into socialists while socialists were rapidly abandoning reformist socialism for Marxism; and Marxism was being appropriated by the fanatical "Vladimir Ilyich" (Lenin). The prewar European states system that had emerged unscathed from the French revolutionary wars of the previous century now tottered and threatened to collapse as its central components succumbed to revolt.

First came the tumultuous "October Revolution" in which Lenin took the Russian Empire by surprise in November 1917. Then came Benito Mussolini's triumphal "March on Rome" in October 1922. Though in principle a victor, Italy had suffered an unresolved political crisis for decades that was exacerbated rather than alleviated by joining Britain and France (the Entente) in war. On the right, deprived of territorial gains at the expense of fallen empires, pent-up nationalist sentiment amplified by dubious colonial conquest was never satiated. On the left, meanwhile, widespread social unrest—culminating in the occupation of the factories in 1920 and widespread disorder—was inspired by the inflammatory example of the October Revolution. Yet fascism rather than Communism triumphed. And by 1923 the fascists of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) had also gained a hold in Germany. Under the spell of the hitherto entirely unknown aspirant architect Adolf Hitler, they seized centre stage to the south, in Bavaria. From the outset in Munich, its capital, Hitler fixed upon the revolutionary menace of international Bolshevism as the central danger to the nation and indissolubly interconnected with Jews at home and abroad. Whatever Hitler's other goals, his ultimate aim was to liquidate the Jews in Germany; his devoted followers, brutalised by war and humiliated by unexpected defeat, eagerly inhaled the intoxicating rhetoric. Simultaneously, far

beyond the boundaries of Europe, as hopes for revolution faded in Moscow, revolution in China became the order of the day—and its primary victim was Britain, the country's financial overlord.

When from 1937 to 1939 the threat of yet another war appeared on the horizon, the lingering menace of revolution from Bolshevism explained in large part why Britain rejected co-operation with the Soviet Union to deter German aggression. The reasoning was simple, but for the most part concealed in the form of an unwritten assumption, certainly never fully articulated to the population at large: far rather buy off Hitler with timely territorial concessions, even at the cost of dismembering dependent states in Central and Eastern Europe, than risk ushering Communist power into the heart of the continent. Insufficiently understood is the undoubted fact that throughout the 1930s leading conservative politicians within the democracies not only welcomed fascism into power but thereafter also feared that, were fascism overthrown in Italy or Germany—and fascism was seen as only an interim solution—Communism would be almost certain to take its place. The events immediately following the Second World War certainly suggest that such fears were not entirely misplaced. Confidence in the sturdiness of the underlying capitalist system and its democratic legacy was at its nadir. The Great Depression had seen to that.

Thus beyond the spectre of war loomed the more menacing spectre of revolution; a spectre that in the end hastened the advent of a war that from being a distant possibility grew into an immediate certainty. And this grim vision haunted the known world: from San Francisco to Shanghai, from Vladivostok through Berlin to London. Its persistence infinitely complicated the search for peace through collective security as envisaged in the Covenant of the League of Nations, which itself ultimately foundered on unrealistic liberal and socialist expectations. Rearmament was consistently rejected by the left. Pacifism predominated. Yet liberals and socialists sincerely believed in collective security, even though it could not be ensured without force of arms. This fundamental paradox was never resolved, ultimately rendering the reformist left utterly impotent and therefore to be discarded as irrelevant.

Revolution in the form of Communism/Bolshevism—"Workers of the world unite"—was not merely a Marxist idea or even merely a Leninist platform for the fundamental economic and social reconstruction of Soviet Russia. For the existing capitalist system it was also a lethal international contagion, as Lenin openly boasted; one for which no known antidote or vaccine then existed. It was People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin who, dapper in dress shirt and frock-coat, as late as August 1921 described Soviet Russia unequivocally as "the citadel of world revolution".[4] But it fell to the Communist International (Comintern) to subvert the restoration of the established diplomatic values and practices of the prewar order. As "the headquarters of the world revolution" in Moscow, Comintern drew upon and gave purpose to the forces of blind frustration that had accumulated within Europe and the colonial world beyond.[5] Anticipating an uprising in Germany that eventually had to be aborted, in November 1923 a secretary of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee, Vyacheslav Molotov, reminded all Communists that "the October revolution in Russia is the first blow against capitalism. The victorious proletarian revolution in Germany is a yet more powerful blow against it." It followed that "the workers of all countries must help the German proletariat".[6] This was, Lenin bragged, "a completely different kind of international relations".[7] And Comintern was central to that purpose, whereas the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) was free to act without regard to any principle, Communist or otherwise. "Principles!" a senior Russian diplomat said to the startled Chinese ambassador, when asked what the general principles underlying Soviet diplomacy were. "In diplomacy there are no principles, only experience."[8]

Lenin was a genius at improvisation in relentless pursuit of world revolution. From the outset Communist parties were established across the globe and financed with vast sums of Russian money. Infiltration and subversion of the capitalist camp were the order of the day. "Comintern has dozens of ties and agents in every country," Lenin boasted.[9] Trotsky, briefly people's commissar for foreign affairs before building the Red Army, commented by letter in 1923 that "until the war . . . the political lines were far more defined. All international relations were

more stable and every ambassador worked within the framework of delineated treaties, relationships and traditions. If you like, diplomacy was one of position. These days every situation . . . has fundamentally altered. Diplomacy is a consummate war of movement, of which one flank is London, the other Beijing or Tokyo."[10]

The customary forms of international relations were thus systematically overturned by Moscow's messianic commitment to overturning the established international order at all costs and as soon as practicable. At the receiving end throughout Europe, the bureaucratic élite, dressed for the day in detachable collars and morning suits, sitting down to work despatching and receiving ciphered telegrams to and from the embassies of Europe, found their customary conduct of diplomacy repeatedly frustrated by Comintern subversion across the globe. The new régime in Moscow obviously had no respect for its bourgeois counterparts. The reaction was predictable: extravagant rhetoric and threats of war or economic blockade. Facing down retaliation required strong nerves in the Kremlin. And for men like Lenin and Stalin this was par for the course. The resulting indignation merely confirmed them in the belief that the threat they posed was effective. The British foreign secretary, a stickler for tradition, put the matter plaintively in 1927: "What we ask of them is not that they shall change their domestic institutions . . . but that they shall henceforth make their policy conform to the ordinary comity of nations, and abstain from the effort to promote world revolution and from all interference in our internal affairs."[11]

The Bolsheviks, however, were not about to change their practices, especially their pursuit of world revolution, since that would require a change in their very nature. Nor were they about to miss any opportunity that arose from cultivating friction between the victor powers and the defeated: what they called "inter-imperialist contradictions". Was this not how they had managed to slip through the cracks and seize power in the first place? For Lenin and those who succeeded him, gambling on potential revolutions was not merely a matter of belief but an urgent priority for survival. The initial advantage lay in the fact that the economies of Europe were prostrated by the wholesale destruction of capital infrastructure across the entire continent. War had impoverished

the leading trading states of Europe, a situation made all the worse as newly emergent, not least xenophobic and protectionist nation states—victors and vanquished alike—emerged from the wreck of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. These countries through no fault of their own found themselves faced with an insoluble dilemma. They were from the outset torn from within between the observation of two mutually exclusive principles: the search for ethnically homogeneous state boundaries on the one hand, and strategically defensible frontiers on the other. When confronted by the need to choose between the two at any given moment, they invariably decided upon whatever offered the greater amount of territory—a recipe for international conflict, and, of course, a godsend to a master tactician like Hitler, seeking to exacerbate relations between those whose lands he coveted.

War had also unstitched the seams that held society together. This was not just a matter of alienation from government. The state had always maintained its supremacy through the monopoly of force. But as a result of the 1914–18 war, millions of men aged eighteen or over had been brutalised in order to win against the enemy. Ex-combatants knew how to shoot and to use the bayonet to deadly effect. A gun was never hard to find, even in countries like Britain, where domestic possession was still legal. Immediately after the war, indeed for some years thereafter, Germany was not unique in multiple examples of random political assassination and violent public disorder. In Italy the demobilised were the main object of concern on the part of nervous liberal governments anxious for public order. Soldiers returning from war soon fell ready prey in 1919 as likely recruits to Mussolini's *fasci di combattimento*. And acute social dislocation presented a unique opportunity for the expansion of Communism not just in Europe, but across the globe—a critical objective for those who believed that the traditional state was a thing of the past.

In spite of what has been asserted, the revolutionary objectives set by Lenin were sustained, albeit more cautiously, even under Stalin, as they were under his successors (whether they pursued them purposefully or not; some were manifestly indifferent). The system to which they answered was such that the only issue differentiating them was that of

degree and opportunity, not one of principle. The weight of the past was overwhelming. It towered over them. The priority given to international revolution thus varied from one leader to another, but was itself never extinguished even in the worst of times. It was in this sense an integral part of the structure; an inescapable legacy. Indeed, it was precisely these subversive ambitions that inspired Hitler's vision of *Götterdämmerung* and critically undermined the trust of Britain and France in the Soviet Union as a potential ally in confronting Nazi Germany during the late 1930s.

Britain was, indeed, a case in point. By virtue of economic weight alone, it had to form the cornerstone of any alliance intended against the threat from Nazi Germany. Historians of British foreign policy, however, have tended to see everything with too much hindsight, through the eyes of post-imperial Britain. They have neglected the critical fact that interwar London also presided over a massive global empire, and that this empire had visibly begun disintegrating from its zenith in 1919. As a consequence, Britain was necessarily a distracted power, not only inclined to give way in Europe to meet more urgent, far-flung needs, but also shaping its European purposes with an eye fixed not only on domestic economic needs but also on pressing imperial priorities. When, for instance, it was reported that Prince Bismarck of the German embassy in London had told Hitler that "a very influential section of British public opinion strongly favours non-interference in European affairs", the general reaction expressed in the Foreign Office was one of indignant surprise. Yet the wily and cynical realist Orme Sargent retorted, "But is not Bismarck unfortunately right?"[12] Absolutely.

Foreign policy was first and foremost about imperial interests: defence, imperial defence. It was no accident that at the top of the armed forces sat the Committee of Imperial Defence. During this era of unparalleled colonial unrest, when even schoolboys in Cairo came out on strike against the British, overseas policy represented a desperate attempt to hold back the incoming tidal wave of change that inevitably exacerbated the intensity of domestic political debate. Thus to many, certainly in the British Conservative Party, the security of Western Europe was of course significant, but a commitment of only secondary

importance; while that of Eastern Europe was of no importance at all.[13] It was almost as though, with the First World War over, Britain had finished with Europe, and now was the time to return to purely domestic or imperial concerns.

In the end it all came down to money. Democratic governments rose and fell on the back of successful or failing economies, and increases in taxation were always unpopular. Empires had never appeared for any reason other than the accumulation of wealth and its secure protection. India was the largest market for British goods, including a very high proportion of manufactures.[14] China came second. Conservative minister Neville Chamberlain, former lord mayor of Birmingham, was one who highlighted the fact that the evacuation of Shanghai and Hong Kong would destroy one of the greatest sources from which Britain drew trade.[15] Here the clash with Communism, in the form of the first Chinese revolution (1925–27), was never a matter of doubt. Sir Cecil Clementi, governor of Hong Kong, announced in no uncertain terms that "[w]e are quite determined to have no Bolshevism in the Colony".[16]

The interwar era must be seen as one whole. By focusing almost exclusively on European developments, historians have overlooked the direct link between Comintern's subversion of the empire in the 1920s and attitudes to Russia in Europe through the 1930s. This oversight is encouraged by reading too much into Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of Stalin from 1929. Many, certainly in the Foreign Office, believed that world revolution had been dropped entirely—indeed some historians unfortunately still do; an assumption made plausible by the fact that Comintern's offensive ceased to be as effective as it had once been. And Britain's secret intelligence service MI6, on a tight budget that did not allow for setting priorities purely on the basis of sentiment, continued to see the Soviet Union as the main enemy through to the middle of the 1930s.[17]

It was not for lack of effort from below that Comintern was relatively ineffective. Successful pursuit of the class war crucially depended upon more than the painful contraction of living standards. Ironically the collapse of the US stock market on Wall Street in 1929, the long-awaited

catalyst to revolution in the West, lent credence to the assumption that revolution was dead, because it failed to accelerate the revolutionary tide. In key parts of Europe, and to the surprise of many, reformist Social Democracy stepped in to prop up the existing socio-economic order. Where were the Communists, the sections of Comintern? They were, indeed, instructed to fight the social democrats at every turn, although—and this was critical—not to the point of seizing power. Meanwhile the Kremlin, urgently in need of respite, reined in Communist hotheads prematurely eager for revolutionary action as it bought time for the hasty modernisation of Russia from top to bottom. Yet this pause was not meant as anything more than an enforced tactical retreat. It was never intended as surrender and abandonment of the cause. The forces that drove Comintern from below within the Soviet Communist Party were marking time only reluctantly and not without complaint, as was evident in challenges to Stalin's ascendancy during the year of crisis, 1932. Those who ruled Britain and had the most to lose fully understood that the relatively calm sea might prove to be only an ebb tide.

With over eight million Germans out of work, the Great Depression was enough to hand Hitler an unparalleled opportunity. In Germany as in Britain, Social Democracy dominated the working-class vote sufficiently to neutralise through timely palliatives the demands voiced loudly for truly revolutionary change. And those who were inclined to dismiss Hitler's rabble-rousing about the threat from international Bolshevism, even as the Depression undermined living standards and starkly exposed the gulf between rulers and ruled, found to their horror that the tide of revolution unexpectedly rolled in again, engulfing France and Spain during the torrid summer of 1936. Liberal democracy was in peril once more. Mussolini summed up the dilemma of the democracies and their prevailing political beliefs: "Liberalism can be applied to a country where all the parties act within the boundaries of the state, but from the moment one party depends upon or permits itself to be inspired from abroad, liberalism becomes impracticable."[18]

This certainly happened in Spain. Here as in France social turbulence, already apparent in 1934, reached disturbing new heights. The Popular Front, innovated in France and adopted in Moscow primarily

to stem the spread of fascism, and duly condemned by Trotsky as a betrayal of the revolution, emerged instead as the revolution's Trojan horse. And whereas in 1928 Comintern amounted to forty parties and 1.6 million members, by 1935 it had grown to sixty-one parties and 3.1 million members.[19] More importantly, it had returned to Western Europe with a dynamic of its own and a broad appeal unseen in the 1920s. Spain was soon riven in two, while France teetered on the edge. All of a sudden Bolshevism re-emerged as a practical proposition in the heart of Europe and at the gateway to empire, decoupling Britain's confidence in France and instantaneously unravelling French confidence in the Soviet Union. It was not long before the road to the East opened for Hitler to march through unimpeded.

Despite all this, the centrality of the role of Communism in the interwar years has taken a long time to be accepted by historians of international relations. The Grand Alliance between Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States in World War II and their falling out in the Cold War that followed had a deadening effect, suppressing within the minds of an entire generation any awareness of the profound conflict over Communism that predated the Second World War and played its own part in generating that war. This suppression, conscious or not, of an awkward truth inadvertently opened a space to the right for polemicists like Ernst Nolte to frame the rise of fascism as the inevitable consequence of the October Revolution.[20] To say the least, this was dangerously simplistic; more importantly, it stifled further historical research as it opened the door to political polemic. For the majority of the academic centre-left, Nolte was sufficient reason to rule out Bolshevism as having played any role at all.

One distortion of history thus prompted another. It was customary in the 1960s to dismiss as of no consequence Hitler's obsessive talk about the dangers from Bolshevism: to assert that it had no real foundations in fact, and to claim that it was entirely disingenuous, being merely a ruse to hoodwink the unsuspecting. A symptom of this approach was reliance upon one diary entry from Italian foreign minister Count Ciano to claim that the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 was "really clearly anti-British" (2 November 1937), while ignoring the subsequent entries in

which Ciano boasts of "the new, powerful anti-Communist system" (5 November 1937) and "our formidable anti-Russian system" (9 November 1937).[21] And it is perhaps a typical weakness of the diplomatic historian to pay rather more attention to process than to purpose, assuming the motive springs to be known and unchanging as everything inexorably follows its usual geopolitical course. With respect to the interwar era historians and biographers have had no choice but to acknowledge that the personality of Hitler was wholly exceptional: a mind in the grip of an extremely abnormal psychosis. So what more need be said? But one does not have to rationalise Hitler's diplomacy in the manner of A.J.P. Taylor to see that focusing excessively on Hitler's personality can easily obscure perception of other important, underlying explanations for war. One man is not an army.

The larger role of international Communism has thus tended to be cast into the shadows, if no longer entirely discarded, within the traditional narrative explaining the tension between Nazi Germany and the rest of Europe. Moreover, it is of interest to note that this was not a matter of contention between right and left. The loud silence among more conservative historians was, ironically, echoed on the left. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, avoided almost any reference to the Communist International in *The Age of Extremes*. He explicitly rejected the idea that the rise of fascism was in any way a reaction to the Communist movement, no doubt for fear of justifying it: "the Right-wing backlash responded not against Bolshevism as such, but against all movements, and notably the organized working-class, which threatened the existing order of society or could be blamed for its breakdown".[22] Yet there was no way Social Democracy "threatened the existing order of society", as Hobsbawm put it, in the interwar period. On the contrary, socialists notoriously propped it up. The Labour Party in Britain under the famously deferential Ramsay MacDonald was a prime example. The greater fear was of a Communist revolution. That is why Comintern at one notorious stage beginning in 1928 stigmatised social democrats indiscriminately as "social fascists". Only Bolshevism red in tooth and claw actually threatened to overturn capitalism. That was why it appeared in the first place, and why the Third International was created to supplant

the Second International; this Hobsbawm surely well understood, as a Communist Party member until the very end.

In depicting the eve of the Second World War, historians have more often than not grudgingly conceded Communism a bit-part only, wandering on and off stage while the audience's attention has been intentionally directed to the familiar interplay between the more reputable actors, as the conventional script of diplomatic history prescribes. Communism deserves, however, to be reinstated in its true role. This is in part what Arno Mayer, writing in 1967, was referring to: "The analytic framework of conventional diplomatic history simply must be enlarged to accommodate the complexities of international relations in an age of mass and crisis politics, in an age of international civil war."[23]

The purpose of this work is thus to reach beyond diplomacy and to return international Communism to where it actually was at the time: never far from centre stage, as an enduring if at times unspoken threat to those in charge of government on both sides of the Rhine; to return it, indeed, to the spotlight in accounting for the drama that unfolded between 1919 and 1941. My larger intention, which connects this work with my history of Russia's Cold War, has been to underscore the intimate connection between the role Bolshevism played before the war and the role it played from 1947, after the brief interval of wartime collaboration had misleadingly suggested that deep ideological differences could be indefinitely suppressed. History has hitherto been excessively compartmentalised, if not chopped into pieces, not least separating the realm of ideas from the world of events. And with respect to periods, the interconnective tissue between the interwar era and the Cold War needs patching back together, to allow us at last to view them as an integral whole.

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