

## The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism

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**Reviewer:** Jennifer Cowe

Attempting to redefine our understanding of the realities of Communism, both ideologically and as a lived actuality, is not a project for the faint hearted. In the gargantuan 600-plus page *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, S. A. Smith attempts to provide an international perspective on contemporary Communist historical writing, whilst avoiding the old, mired left-wing historiography that has so plagued the subject for years. This international perspective permeates both the scope of the 35 essays included and the contributors. Essays included present as varied a range as one could hope for, from sections and essays on ideology, culture, social relations, sport, and women under Communism. The breadth of subject matter is surely testimony to a renewed interest in far-left ideology in academia within the last few years, and the impact of work by the likes of Bruno Bosteel's *The Actuality of Communism*, Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis*, and the two volumes of *Idea of Communism* edited by Slavoj Žižek.<sup>(1)</sup> Utilising new documentation made available by the fall of the Soviet Union, this is a timely addition to much of the recent ideologically based work being produced, including essays by Timothy Cheek, Paul Betts, Tim Rees and Anne Alexander.

In his introductory essay, S. A. Smith acknowledges the basic contradiction within the conditions needed to propagate Communism, as outlined by Marx, and the reality of those states which actually adopted it practically. With certain notable exceptions, he shows that Communism often took root either as a direct result of war/colonial insurrection and/or within countries with authoritarian systems already in place 'changes of borders, the devastation caused by war, genocide and forced migration as a consequence of the imperial politics' that beleaguered Eastern Europe and that 'played an essential role in the establishment of communist regimes' (p. 204). Thus the basic premise is that Communism took root in countries which were unprepared economically and as a result, the implementation of it at a state level was flawed from the beginning. This assertion is explored thoroughly by Pavel Kolar in his essay 'Communism in Eastern Europe', investigating the basic contradictions inherent in the employment of an ideological system within a region economically and socially unequipped for such a rapid overhaul. Paresh Chattopadhyay's superb essay on 'Marx and Engels on Communism' expands on this fundamental paradox relating to the conditions required for Communism to be achievable and the depressing consequences lived by millions as a result.

S. A. Smith provides a clear summary of how Communism will be approached within the confines of a state

structure, and whilst this provides a comprehensible historical and ideological construct through which to understand the collection as a whole, it ignores some crucial factors if the reader is to fully appreciate the complexities inherent in such a multifaceted subject. By excluding non-state Communist activity, the reader is left with a very one-sided view of the period, and also a geographically specific analysis. Despite three outstanding essays regarding Communism in South East Asia, Latin America and Africa, many of the essays are fixed upon the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. By focusing on these areas, as examples of state-backed Communism, the reader has very little understanding of what was happening in so-called advanced capitalist countries, the very economies that Marx believed ready for Communism. The omission of any analysis of both the political and intellectual influence of Communism in Western Europe and America is a particular pity. Maud Anne Bracke's essay on '1968', which is unarguably a fine examination of that seminal year from a global perspective is especially inhibited by the overall need for cohesion – it looks at 1968 from such a wide international focus that the reader fails to comprehend the significance of this year, particularly for the developed west. This is a subject that would have benefitted greatly from an in-depth assessment of the schisms appearing within the Left at this crucial period and how this fracturing can still be felt today. From a French and Italian perspective this was a period of extreme generational upheaval within the Left, which would lead to fundamental societal and cultural changes but also to more extreme forms of opposition, rarely sanctioned by national parties. Where, for example, is the examination of the lasting influence of the Situationist International; from music and art to popular culture, the philosophy of the SI is as prevalent and influential today as it was almost 50 years ago? Considering the many left-wing ideologies present in 1968, why does this one still resonate so strongly?

By ignoring the complex role of Communism outwith government, the collection fails to address the fractures between sanctioned Communist parties at a national level within the west and the groups claiming similar revolutionary origins but without any allegiance to centralised party control. How do we explain the rise of the Red Brigades within Italy, a country with a well-organised and prominent party, and why did the PCI choose to deny their very existence? In America we see the formation of the Weather Underground, a revolutionary group devoid of any affiliations with centralised Communist parties and the Black Panthers, a faction with complex ideological allegiances, drawing insights directly from the anti-imperialism of writers like Frantz Fanon, and as notorious for their criminality and links to gang crime as for their Free Breakfast for Children and Ten Point Programs. In Germany the Baader-Meinhof group combined bank robbing and political assassinations with the philosophy of Mao Zedong and the Frankfurt School, adding a bizarre mix of glamour and an early appreciation of marketing and consumer society to the revolutionary cocktail:

The Baader-Meinhof Gang drew a measure of support that violent leftists in the United States, like the Weather Underground never enjoyed. A poll at the time showed that a quarter of West Germans under forty felt sympathy for the gang and one-tenth said they would hide a gang member from the police. Prominent intellectuals spoke up for the gang's righteousness (as Germany even into the 1970s was still a guilt-ridden society. When the gang started robbing banks, newscasts compared its members to Bonnie and Clyde. (Andreas) Baader, a charismatic, spoiled psychopath, indulged in the imagery, telling people that his favourite movies were *Bonnie and Clyde*, which had recently come out, and *The Battle of Algiers*. The pop poster of Che Guevara hung on his wall, (while) he paid a designer to make a Red Army Faction logo, a drawing of a machine gun against a red star.<sup>(2)</sup>

As stereotypical as the above description of the 'professional' revolutionary has become, it is a mark of how significant 1968 and the following years were that these tropes are immediately decipherable. What we can see in this representation of the Baader-Meinhof group is an understanding of the connections in international revolution, the sway of popular culture as a signifier of struggle, in this case cinema, and the need for a recognisable logo. What conclusions can we draw regarding the failure of state Communism to manifest itself in western economies ripe for the progression to Communism, the reality of moribund centralised party structures and self promoting, autonomous 'terrorist' groups, skilled in the use of publicity and extreme violence? Likewise, I feel an opportunity was missed to further examine the power of neo-

Marxism and anti-imperialism upon the Western intelligentsia in Mark Gamsa's essay 'Communism and the artistic intelligentsia'. The comparative study of Russia and China, whilst interesting and worthy of note, especially in relation to censorship, again provides too narrow a focal point. Such questions appear to be outside the remit of this book.

With a scope that on one hand is so substantial due to the global nature of the subject, but at the same time so restrictive owing to the omission of non-state movements, the reader is left with questions and a desire for more contextualisation, and that perhaps is no bad thing. A collection of essays like this cannot possibly cover every angle, or for that matter, please everyone. Whilst I have focused on an area that I felt was missing and that would have provided an interesting counterpoint to the preponderance of Soviet and Chinese material, this in no way detracts from the overall excellence of this collection. Within the parameters clearly set out in the introduction, this collection offers the reader the opportunity to see the global nuances of Communism, the marked similarities of experience of those living in states adhering to fundamental Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the far less easy to understand spaces between.

## Notes

1. Bruno Bosteel, *The Actuality of Communism* (London, 2011); Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London, 2010); *The Idea of Communism*, edited by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Fred Kaplan, 'A match that burned the Germans', *The New York Times*, 12 August 2009. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

### Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/30/oxford-handbook-history-communism-review> [2]

Los Angeles Review of Books

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