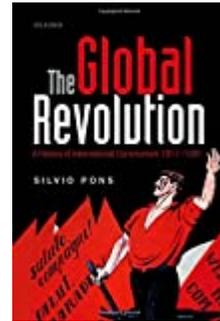




**Silvio Pons.** *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917-1991.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xx + 365 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-965762-9.



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Sometime in the early 1950s, Alexander Dubček was deep in his Moscow training to be a leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party—which he would eventually achieve, in 1968. Dubček was a committed ideologue: his socialist father had brought the family back from the United States in the hopes of building socialism in Slovakia after World War One, and from there they went on to a commune in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Dubček read Vladimir Lenin with enthusiasm. When Dubček encountered a comment in one of the sacred texts, to the effect that someday a country more economically advanced than Russia would become socialist and then naturally take over the leadership of the world revolutionary cause, he underlined this and wrote in the margins: “Czechoslovakia?”[1]

Dubček can be forgiven his naiveté. At the Moscow Higher Party School, he was among Communists from many countries and to him it looked like Communism was poised to expand around the world. In its first two decades, it had transformed Russia into a world power; in the last decade, it had expanded its reach in Europe and Asia, and won the admiration of millions elsewhere in the world. Much recent scholarly attention has focused on Communism as a national phenomenon, exploring the way the movement was rooted in national

cultures and promoted national histories and national agendas. This nationalism helps to explain, of course, why the Soviet Union was not about to take a back seat to Czechoslovakia or East Germany or any other ally. We can easily forget, as we ground Russian, Polish, Yugoslav, and Chinese Communists in their cultural milieu, that they saw themselves as part of an international movement, centered (most of the time) in Moscow. So, of course, did the rest of the world.

Silvio Pons is a distinguished political historian of Communism, author and editor of a number of works on the international history of the Cold War.[2] *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917-1991* is a welcome survey of the international political structure of Communism during the seventy-four years of Soviet rule. However, it is neither a global history nor a study of international Communism, as its name implies. Pons focuses on the policy of Soviet leaders toward international revolution and toward the Communist parties around the world (both those in power and not). He traces an arc that ascends to about the time Dubček completed his Moscow studies, then descends rapidly to 1991, after which Communism survives in a few countries, but no longer with anything resembling an international character.

Chapter 1 deftly handles the efforts of the Soviet regime to find its place in the world after 1917, putting aside hopes for world revolution and making peace with European powers. Yet one would not guess, from this chapter, that Communism enjoyed near-delirious popularity around the industrialized world in the early years. One reads nothing about the "Little Moscows" in Britain, the success of local Communist politicians in the United States and Western Europe, or the general strikes and other protests in which Communists (and other left parties) played a significant role. The Bavarian and Hungarian revolutions of 1918-19 are mentioned only in passing, mainly as failures to be addressed by Moscow, not as symptoms of a larger phenomenon. Without this context, the dream of world revolution appears simply quixotic.

Similarly, chapter 2, on the interwar years, is mostly about Joseph Stalin. German Communism gets a brief nod, and the Spanish Civil War even briefer. The focus is instead very traditional, on problems of the Comintern (on which Pons is perhaps the leading expert) and on various diplomatic moves, culminating in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.

Chapter 3, on World War Two, is built largely on such documents as communications between Stalin, Andrei Zhdanov, and Georgi Dimitrov, as they dissolved the Comintern and evaluated the Nazi threat and, later, considered the value of partisan resistance in various countries. In this chapter, Pons for the first time gives us a world tour, but major figures and important Communist movements (in South and Southeast Asia, for example) flit by in a sentence or two, never to be seen again.

Pons did not need to portray each Communist movement in full, as it would then be a massive tome. But a book entitled *The Global Revolution* surely ought to give a sense of the global perspective. Instead, the book is largely a *managerial* study. Lenin and Stalin face problems in this or that country, or in the Comintern, and devise responses to them. They are like caretakers of an already-existing estate, deciding when to take in the harvest. We never see those crops spring up.

The postwar chapters are the strongest in the book. Pons takes great care in chapter 4 to emphasize, correctly, that Stalin planned for people's democracies, not Soviet copies, in the half of Europe that fell under Soviet influence after 1945. China joins the conversation as well, of course, at this time seemingly a stalwart in the Soviet camp. Communism is at its most vital in this period, and the discussions about a multi-sited future are serious.

Pons shows that the Marshall Plan had a dramatic impact on Stalin's thinking; he begins to understand that a bipolar world is emerging. The Soviets' Manichaean way of seeing the world becomes self-fulfilling, helping to begin the Cold War.

Though "Time of Decline" is the title of chapter 5, covering the period from Stalin's death to the Prague Spring in 1968, it is really about the Communist apogee. The years 1957-60 saw the launch of Sputnik, the Cuban Revolution, and brief success in the Congo, as well as much to celebrate in Vietnam and China. Closer to the USSR both Poland and Hungary reestablished control after the crises of 1956. In Europe, the outcome was nearly a quarter century of relative peace, until the Solidarity Revolution. Yet Pons argues that the invasion of Hungary in 1956 "demonstrated that the empire created by Stalin could only be defended by repression" (p. 217). Meanwhile, Mao Zedong's China was moving out of the Soviet orbit, establishing a rival center of Communist power; this made managing the Communist movement much more difficult. Soviet leadership was in any case becoming more managerial and less attuned to the nuances of Communism around the world. And thus Leonid Brezhnev could not possibly understand Dubček's idea of "socialism with a human face," and instead reimposed the façade of unity with the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The year 1968 seems to have the same effect on Pons as it had on Tony Judt in *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (2005). Both historians take seriously the intellectual ferment of the international left in the first two postwar decades, and then get decidedly grumpy as they confront the 1960s. We finally meet international supporters of Communism, but they were "deluding themselves" and suffered from "intellectual blindness" (p. 256). No doubt this is true, but in the absence of any discussion of the perspectives of Communism's enthusiasts up until this point (unless they are individual leaders), this analysis rings hollow, and exposes the flaw of trying to write a "global" history of a movement without ever looking at its followers.

Chapter 6, covering the last years of Communism, is interesting because of Pons's argument that Eurocommunism was nearly successful in 1976. Could the Italian Communists have come to power, naturally then offering an alternative source of legitimacy in Europe? Eurocommunism is today neglected, but Pons makes the case for it as an opportunity (like that of the Prague Spring) that the Kremlin of Brezhnev could not recognize.

As we slide to international Communism's end, Pons resorts to old-fashioned history, in which leaders and not societies are the protagonists. Communism generally faded to irrelevance before it surrendered, for sure, but it also retained, to the very end, vitality in some pockets of the empire, most notably in East Germany and Yugoslavia. It is surprising that there is no mention of one of the liveliest Communist parties in the world before and after 1991: the South African Communist Party. There the Communist Party continues to enjoy respect derived from its strong antiapartheid stance and support of the African National Congress. Readers familiar with other parts of the world could no doubt supply other examples of strong Communist parties which Pons did not discuss.

This reviewer could be accused of wanting a different book—perhaps along the lines of Archie Brown's *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (2009). Pons is not interested

in why people supported Communism or what they did with their enthusiasm. He wants to study the Comintern and Cominform documents and the proceedings of international congresses, and he does so well. But readers interested in Communism as a global phenomenon—indeed, as a revolution—the title promises will have to look elsewhere.

#### Notes

[1]. Alexander Dubcek, *Hope Dies Last: The Autobiography of the Leader of the Prague Spring*, trans. Jiri Hoffman (New York: Kodansha, 1993), 70.

[2]. See Padraic Kenney, review of *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism*, ed. Silvio Pons and Robert Service, HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews (January 2011), <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30700>.

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