

The Pressures of Polarity: European Communists After 1945

The polarity between Western capitalism and Soviet communism was a major factor in influencing the European Communists to support the Soviet Union after World War II. The choice to view the Soviet Union as a successful working model based on Marxist theory accounted for much of its appeal to Western European Communists, since the only alternative during the Cold War was to embrace capitalism, which was diametrically opposed to their beliefs. This, in addition to numerous other factors particular to the post-war era that are outlined in this paper, encouraged the appeal of the Soviet Union to Communists in Western Europe after 1945.

After World War II, a mythology emerged about the Soviet Union as a Marxist socialist utopia that captured the collective revolutionary imagination of Western European Communists. The numbers in the French Communist Party increased dramatically after 1945, and the whole Leftist intelligentsia in France romanticized the Soviet Union as the place where Marxist socialism had been victoriously established in an ideological purity. There was a pronounced lack of real research done on the Soviet Union following World War II, and French studies on the Soviet Union actually stopped altogether between 1945 and 1956. This occurred as a result of the Left intelligentsia becoming the dominant French intelligentsia in the post-war era. There was a projection of the Russian Revolution being a perfect example of Marxist socialism somewhere far away, accentuated by the overriding opinion that it could not happen in France.ⁱ

Marxist ideals were what the European Communists thought they were supporting in the Soviet Union, however, had they studied the Soviet society in depth during the years following World War II, they would have seen that Marxist-Leninist roots had veered quite far from pure Marxist ideology from the very start of what later became the Soviet Union. In his Communist Manifesto that he wrote with Engels, Marx maintained that society was split into two groups, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and the bourgeoisie would be unable to contain the revolt of the productive forces that were unstoppable with the growth of industry. "...there is too much civilization, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce... The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them."ⁱⁱ Marxist theory insisted that as the proletariat was a commodity and fluctuated with the

market, it would inevitably go through various stages of development in its struggle with the bourgeoisie. As industry developed, the proletariat would increase in number and concentrate into masses, forming unions against the bourgeoisie in order to maintain their wages and prepare for revolts.ⁱⁱⁱ Lenin, however, sped up these phases of development that the proletariat would experience. In his "Our Programme" written in 1899, Lenin made clear that professional revolutionaries must lead the workers into revolt rather than revolution developing organically from within the ranks of the workers. Lenin further insisted that Marx and Engels were taking the workers backwards into antiquated theories of submission to governments and bourgeois parties who oppressed them.^{iv}

After World War II the countries of Europe underwent a recovery period where both economic and political systems were being rebuilt and reshaped, and during this time there was also considerable pressure from the U.S. on Western Europe that it become involved in free trade and be free of all Communist intervention. The anti-communist Marshall Plan was proclaimed by America in 1947, encouraging Europe to remake itself on a model of America, "promoting corporative structures of interest intermediation among business, agriculture, trade unions, professions, and the state"^v. The Marshall Plan was a containment doctrine that isolated the Soviet Union and European Communists, and by the late 1940s the U.S. and British anti-communists backed the European Communists into a corner that ultimately forced them to choose Stalinization, or the Soviet Union, over them.

In Cold War Europe that had been polarized between Western capitalist democracy and Soviet Communism, European Communists embraced what commonality they could find with the Soviet Union in order to keep their own Marxist ideals alive. It was Soviet anti-Fascism, the consistency of Soviet anti-bourgeois sentiment, and the perceived Bolshevik Jacobin roots that formed a Soviet commonality with Western European communists. This commonality, coupled with the European Communists' belief that the popular Soviet military success in World War II had been at the hands of a true Marxist socialist state formed by the values and institutions of Marxist ideological purity, provided a foundation of the Soviet Union's appeal to them. Neither their commonality nor a belief in the Soviet Union as a true Marxist socialist state, however, would have provided this appeal had the Soviet state not been very talented at producing and disseminating extremely effective propaganda. The Soviet propaganda that successfully concealed the

violent purges of millions of its own citizens and those of neighbouring countries after World War II, was a primary tool of its own existence as well as of its perception to Western European Communists.

The triumphant Soviet influence throughout Europe after 1945 was similar to the anti-Fascist Communism of 1935-1939 in terms of Soviet legitimacy in Western Europe, and one followed the other in a similar era of fascination with Soviet strength. Both eras occurred while violent repression was occurring within the Soviet Union, but information regarding the repression was largely unknown outside of its borders. The Soviet state's concealment of its own atrocities ultimately enabled the Soviet Union's appeal to the European Communists, who projected their own Marxist ideals onto Soviet propaganda they received. This appeal centered on Soviet anti-Fascism, Soviet revolutionary methods of overthrowing the bourgeoisie and redistributing wealth in their own society, common Jacobin roots, and the perception of the Soviet state as having been established on pure Marxist utopian ideals and presenting a viable, working model of successful economic determinism.

The Soviet anti-Fascism campaign played a huge part in procuring the support of the European Communists. The Resistance Movement in Western Europe after 1945 was largely comprised of Communists and Socialists, and its large numbers of Communists and Socialists supported Stalin's anti-Fascist Communism enthusiastically. Not only was the Soviet Union a practical success story of the ideology that they believed in, but a victorious, successful model that had overcome the Fascist threat that was looming over Europe. From 1935-1939 the "anti-Fascism" campaign was paramount to fleshing out the Stalinist strategy to gain support in Europe. After the rise of Hitler, Stalin effectively capitalized on the growing anti-Fascism in Europe to consolidate his own power, and his anti-Fascism campaign increased the popularity of Communism in Europe before the war, particularly in France. The Communist anti-Fascist movement was not only about class struggle in the Soviet Union, but was a tool specifically designed to increase the numbers of the Communist parties throughout Western Europe. After World War II the Soviet military victory brought a new respect to Communist all over the continent; the French Communist Party had 800,000 members, the Italian Communists were a huge political force, and even in Holland, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries, communism was now a force to be reckoned with.^{vi} In the early 1940s throughout Western Europe there existed an openness and possibility of a democratic and collectivist way that could develop in its own political fashion, and what resulted were

European Communist parties that became actively involved in the governments of Western Europe. With the polarization of the Cold War that followed however, the French and Italian Communists were expelled from their national governments during the mid-1940s.^{vii} It follows that after their expulsion from their own national forums, the European Communists looked to the Soviet example as the only vehicle through which their Marxist ideology could be realized.

The Russian Bolsheviks, one of the primary groups who founded what was to become the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, shared a Jacobin lineage with the French Communists, which further established the relationship between the Soviet and European Communists after 1945. With the main Jacobin premise being the exercise of terrorist dictatorships in the name of the people, the tie of their common lineage was the legitimacy of terror for either public safety or against the enemies of the people.^{viii} Since the Communist parties in Western Europe after 1945 were dominated by the Soviet Union, at that time there also emerged a reticence to criticize the Soviet state out of unwillingness to become labelled a fascist or capitalist-imperialist. An integrated Jacobin radical view within their beliefs may have influenced the French communists as well during this time, causing them to accept suggestions of Soviet atrocities committed against enemies of the state. There was also a degree of political legitimacy achieved by the French Communist Party through its Soviet connections:

“The PCF (French Communist Party) sought to be the only ‘authoritative’ source able to speak about the Soviet Union..., an actor engaged in the ‘political field’ as a producer of proposals and programmes and as a seeker of a share of political power, articulating a set of ‘authorised’ images of the Soviet Union.”^{ix}

The fact that the bourgeoisie had been completely overthrown by a perceived successful and utopian Soviet socialist state, made the Soviet Union very appealing in the eyes of French Communists after 1945. The bourgeoisie were reviled by French Leftist intellectuals. Soviet anti-bourgeois methods of implementing socialism were heralded by French Communists as true to their Marxist ideology. Some of these methods included confiscation of the property of the bourgeois Russian nobility, the dictatorship of the proletariat, equal work for women, redistribution of wealth, and eradication of poverty. The most pronounced root of communism in France was the hatred of the bourgeoisie, which had deep roots going back to before the French Revolution. For the French communists throughout their history, the

bourgeoisie incarnated capitalism. In his development of Marxist-Leninist theory when formulating the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Lenin placed the bourgeoisie as the main forerunner of Fascism and Imperialism.^x

In conclusion, it was primarily the polarity introduced by the Cold War that forced European Communists to align themselves with the Soviet Union, in the hope of supporting a realization of their own Marxist ideals there. While there was much to tie Soviet Communists to European Communists (and French Communists in particular), it was from Marxist doctrine itself that the Soviet model had departed, and this was de-emphasized in the Soviet propaganda that emphasized the Soviet anti-Fascism and economic success that appealed to both European Communists and the Resistance. After World War II both Western Capitalists and Soviet Communists were squeezing the European Communists for its allegiance to them, in their quest to influence the political shaping of Europe. After the pressure of the American Marshall Plan drove the European Communists to align further with the Soviet Union in 1947, Moscow effectively controlled Western European Communists. Older European communists such as Maurice Thorez and Palmiro Togliatti who had been living in exile, returned from Moscow and controlled local organizations to further Soviet Communist aims.^{xi} However by 1956 after the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary, many of the European Communists abandoned their allegiance to the Soviet Union altogether.

ⁱ P. 12, Desjardins

ⁱⁱ P. 452, Brophy Vol 2

ⁱⁱⁱ P. 452, Brophy Vol 2

^{iv} P. 627, Brophy Vol 2

^v P. 95, Eley

^{vi} P. 144, Laqueur

^{vii} P. 92, Eley

^{viii} P. 234, Furet

^{ix} P. 14, Desjardins

^x P. 4, Furet

^{xi} P. 12, Urwin

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