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WRITTEN WITH GRACE AND STYLE

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ROBERT SERVICE

COMRADES

COMMUNISM: A WORLD HISTORY

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COMRADES

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Victor Sebestyen, *Daily Telegraph*

‘The decency of communism’s ideals and the horror of its effects form the basis of Robert Service’s masterly handling of the beginning, progress and (all but) end of communism . . . It is also a finely tuned description of what life was like under communism’

John Lloyd, *Financial Times Magazine*

‘Service has read widely – using the extensive archives and poster collection of Stanford University’s Hoover Institution to good effect – and he has organised his material in an analytical narrative that sweeps the reader along’

Michael Burleigh, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘A deceptively ambitious book. Neither unreasonably long nor overwhelmingly theoretical, it swiftly chronicles the movement from its philosophical origins to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic transformation of China . . . an ideal introductory history’

Anne Applebaum, *Spectator*

Robert Service is the author of the highly acclaimed *Lenin: A Biography*, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, *Russia: Experiment with a People* and *Stalin: A Biography*, as well as many other books on Russia's past and present. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and works at St Antony's College, Oxford. He is married with four children.

Also by Robert Service

LENIN
A Biography

RUSSIA
Experiment with a People

STALIN
A Biography

ROBERT SERVICE

COMRADES

COMMUNISM: A WORLD HISTORY

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Preface

This book began with an idea and a plan. The idea was to put together a general account of communism around the world; the plan was to do this mainly by assembling the secondary literature on country after country with experience of communism. Surprisingly few attempts have been made at such a project, and nearly all of them were written before the collapse of communist states in eastern Europe and the USSR in 1989–91.

The initial idea was knocked about like a punch-bag. As I learned about the five-sixths of the world's land mass that was not the Soviet Union, the structure and contents of the book underwent much remodelling. This is what happens with most books that have ever been written. Yet the plan was scrapped – and for a very positive reason. In 2004–5 I spent a sabbatical year at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Archives are the water of refreshment for the historian. When I discovered the vastness of resources available to scholars in the shadow of the Hoover Tower, I went through box after box of documents like a thirsty traveller. The endnotes give some idea of the exceptional holdings on countries such as Hungary, Cuba and India. Just as instructive for me were the boxes on the Soviet Union, especially on its relationship with the 'world communist movement'. And although I did not have it in mind to do much on American and British communism, any reluctance was dissolved when I examined the boxes themselves. There were also many moments when odd little files suggested themselves from the catalogue: Ivy Litvinov on Rose Cohen; Soviet officials on Arthur and Yevgenia Ransome; Herbert Hoover's food-relief officials on the regime of Béla Kun; defecting Cuban ministers on Castro and his entourage; Eugenio Reale on Togliatti's difficulties over eastern Europe; and the Russian diary of Malcolm Muggeridge.

The book investigates communism in its many aspects. This obviously requires an examination of communist states, their leaderships and their societies. Of equal importance are communist ideology and its appeal to people outside such states. Likewise I have given a good deal of space to twentieth-century geopolitics. Moreover, a truly global account of communism must also cover countries where communists failed to get anywhere near to national power.

The archival research nudged me towards modifying the interpretations I started with. It also brought events and situations to life – and I hope that this conveys itself to those who read the chapters. The staff at the Hoover Institution Archives were extraordinarily knowledgeable and helpful. I owe a debt to Elena Danielson, Linda

Bernard, Carol Leadenham, Ron Bulatov, Lora Soroka, David Jacobs, Lyalya Kharitonova and their colleagues, who pointed me in the direction of several boxes I would have missed. My gratitude goes too to Robert Conquest for originally encouraging my stay at the Hoover Institution and to Director John Raisian and Board of Overseers member Tad Taube for making it a practical possibility. Deborah Ventura and Celeste Szeto, who supervise arrangements for visiting scholars, were models of helpfulness.

My wife Adele was a tremendous help throughout the process, carrying out research in the National Archives at Kew as well as reading up and discussing Asian communist history while we were in California; she also scrutinised and improved the entire text. I also want to express thanks to those who advised on one or more of the following chapters: Alan Angell, Arnold Beichman, William Beinart, Leslie Bethell, Archie Brown, Richard Clogg, Robert Conquest, Valpy Fitzgerald, Robert Evans, Paul Flewers, John Fox, Timothy Garton Ash, Roy Giles, Paul Gregory, Jonathan Haslam, Ronald Hingley, Michael Kaser, Alan Knight, Simon Sebag Montefiore, Norman Naimark, Brian Pearce, Silvio Pons, Alex Pravda, Paul Preston, Martyn Rady, Harold Shukman, Steve Smith, Geoffrey Swain, Steve Tsang, Amir Weiner and Jerry White. My literary editor David Godwin was encouraging from the earliest stage of the project. Georgina Morley at Macmillan and Kathleen MacDermott at Harvard have been characteristically constructive editors. Peter James has copyedited the printout with exemplary care.

A few words are in order here about the book's organisation. Certain chapters on particular countries or periods repeat information given in other chapters. This, I know, is authorial sin; but I ask indulgence on the ground that the basic details need to be kept in the foreground of so lengthy an account. I must also mention that the following usages are adopted: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea appears as North Korea; the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as North Vietnam; the German Democratic Republic as East Germany. A further alert: I have employed simplified modes of transliteration in the book. Occasionally they are inconsistent, especially as regards Chinese. Thus the modern Guomindang appears more traditionally as Kuomintang. Nor did I seek to render Zinoviev as Zinovev but instead stuck to the conventional English rendering. Dates are given exclusively according to the Gregorian calendar, place names in the bibliography in concordance with the contemporaneous habit of the local authorities. I have minimised reference to the full names and acronyms of those many communist parties which frequently changed them.

My own acquaintance with communism happened intermittently. At the conscious level it began in 1956. At my primary school, with the newspapers filled with pictures of the USSR's forces crushing the Hungarian Revolt, we schoolchildren – or at least the boys in the class – welcomed the chance to complete our diary assignments sketching tanks, soldiers and explosions. The Chinese communist invasion of Tibet was another event which left its mark on our minds. The annual prize books at Sunday school included accounts of Christian endurance under assault from Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism. The achievements of Soviet technology, though, turned the mind of our geography master at grammar school. He had read in the newspapers that the USSR had developed a technique to grow wheat north of the Arctic Circle. He concluded that

the USSR might well win the struggle with the West for economic mastery. In the early 1960s I learned Esperanto and acquired foreign penfriends. One was Chinese, another from Czechoslovakia. We corresponded about our daily lives for a year or two before the exchanges with China petered out. Looking back, I have to assume that my Chinese partner was victimised in the Cultural Revolution.

Inexperience of communism was not unusual in the United Kingdom in those years. A personal incentive to make sense of communism came when I studied Russian literature at university. It became obvious how vital it is to understand the historical background to the Soviet order. That was a period, moreover, when students debated Marxism. There was endless discussion about whether communism was inherently despotic or potentially liberating.

This book is an attempt to answer that basic question, among several others. The chapters examine whether the Soviet historical experience was unique; they also enquire into the Kremlin's involvement with communist parties around the world. Above all, though, this is a world history of communism. Countries covering a third of the world's earth surface underwent communisation to a greater or lesser extent in the twentieth century. Communist parties have existed in almost every area of the globe except the polar ice-caps. The engine of my argument is that, despite all the diversity of the states committed to communism, there was an underlying similarity in purpose and practice. Communism was not simply a veneer coating diverse pre-existing national traditions. It adapted itself to those traditions while suffusing them with its own imperatives; and it transformed those countries where it held power for more than a few years. The book provides a narrative and analysis but is not an encyclopaedia. I have not investigated absolutely every communist idea, leader, party or state. I have made choices in order to hold the account together. The book is dedicated to the memory of Matthew Service, Ulsterman, gardening-enthusiast and wonderful father and grandfather.

Robert Service
October 2006

Maps

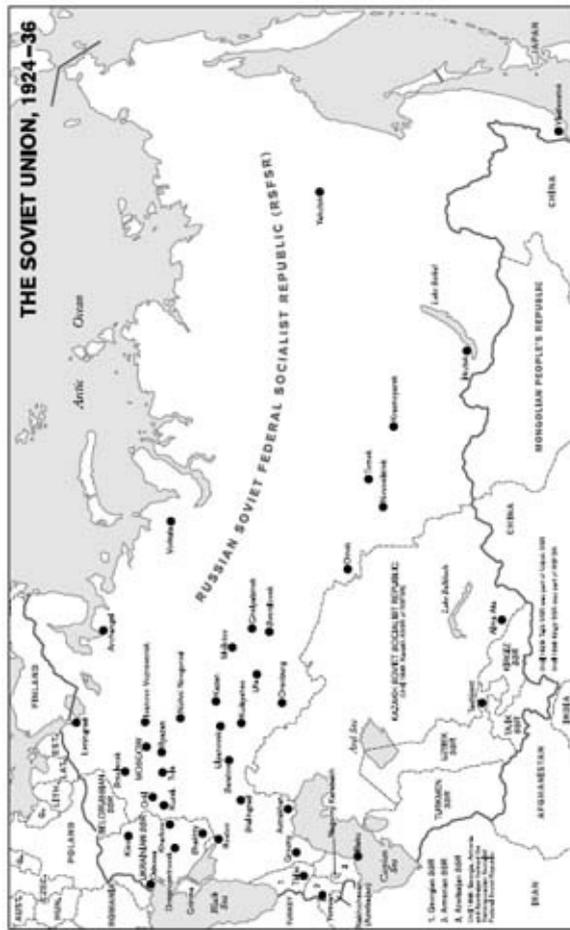
[1. The Soviet Union, 1924–36](#)

[2. Eastern Europe and the Western USSR after the Second World War](#)

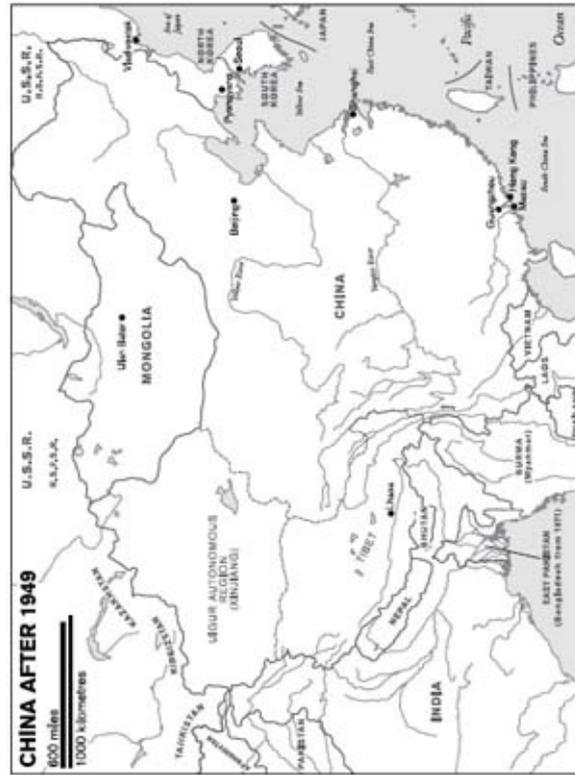
[3. China after 1949](#)

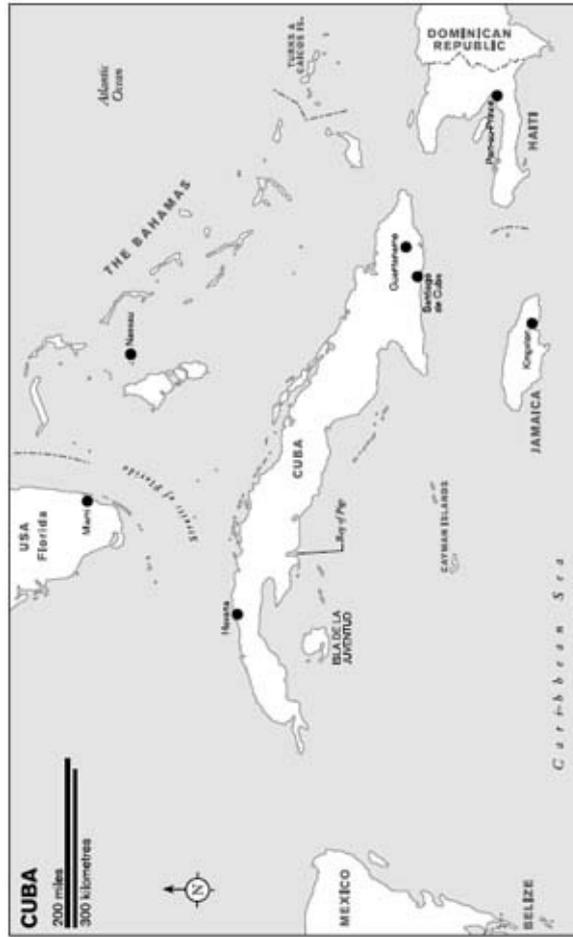
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INTRODUCTION

People in 1989–91 had to pinch themselves to make sure they were not hallucinating. Something extraordinary had happened in world politics. Suddenly communism had collapsed. Until then it had been one of the most powerful and widespread types of modern state. Coming to power in the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, Lenin and his comrades established an order which was reproduced in eastern Europe, China, east Asia, Cuba and elsewhere after the Second World War. In 1989 this communist order was removed from the face of Europe. In 1991 the same thing happened in the Soviet Union. Although China still claimed to be communist, its fundamental economic reforms meant that this was no longer accurate as a comprehensive description. Communist parties clung on to office in a few countries such as North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba; their geopolitical importance was a long way short of the power and prestige of the ‘world communist movement’ in its years of pomp. Communism was fast becoming a historical relic.

Such a transformation brought an end to the struggle known as the Cold War. This was predominantly a conflict between coalitions led by the USSR and the USA, and the Soviet disintegration in December 1991 signalled a definitive victory for the Americans. For years the Cold War had involved the nightmarish possibility of a nuclear strike by one side against the other. Unable to match American advances in the development and dissemination of technology, the Soviet Union had lost the military parity it had possessed. This was not the sole index of defeat. Throughout the contest between the superpowers the Americans had claimed to stand for the market economy, liberal democracy and civil society. Although the USA had often honoured these principles only in the breach, they were the principles widely thought to have triumphed when communism expired in eastern Europe and in the USSR. The West’s political leaders and commentators were proud and excited. Communism had been exposed as an overwhelmingly inferior kind of state order. Many believed that history had come to a close. Liberalism in its political, economic and social manifestations had consigned the ideology and practice of Leninism to the dustbin of the ages. The suggestion was that communism had been a puffball which too many people had walked around as if it was a great oak tree.

Word got about that, if only the Western powers had adopted a more militant political and security policy in the 1920s or even the 1940s, the USSR would have imploded. Presumably historical development could have been terminated seven decades earlier if Churchill’s advice had been heeded and the communist infant – the

early Soviet state – had been strangled in its cradle.

Yet communism endured. By 1941, when the USSR was attacked by the Third Reich, the child had grown to a powerful maturity and threw back Hitler's forces. Soviet forces overran the eastern half of Europe. From Poland to East Germany and from the Baltic shores to the Black Sea the map was repainted. Communist states covered the entire region. In 1949 the communist armies under Mao Zedong seized power in Beijing and proclaimed the People's Republic of China. North Korea and North Vietnam soon acquired communist states. In 1959 there was a revolution in Cuba and Fidel Castro announced his adherence to the world communist movement. At last communism had spread from Eurasia across the Atlantic. A communist-led government was also installed in Chile in the early 1970s. There were further successes for communists as several governments in Asia and Africa announced their commitment to communisation. By the mid-1980s, just before the first mortal blows were delivered to world communism, such states had a record of astonishing expansion. From being just a dream before the First World War it turned itself into a potent reality threatening the capitalist order around the globe.

Debates on communism are as old as communist theory. The communists themselves always loved an argument. They disputed mainly among themselves and with others throughout the nineteenth century. The October Revolution introduced a practical urgency. Communist apologists asserted that a new world was being built in Russia. The party's monopoly of rule was condoned. Dictatorship and terror were purportedly instruments for the direction of a comprehensive system of welfare for working people. The revolutionaries of Russia would put an end to political, economic, cultural and national oppression. Capitalism, according to its enemies, was about to be eradicated. This image of the Soviet state was reproduced down the decades. This happened not only in the USSR but also in the many countries which acquired communist governments after the Second World War. In eastern Europe and China the message went out that a superior order of state and society was being constructed. Privilege was about to be ended, economic waste about to be abolished. Communism was proclaimed as scientific, humanitarian and unstoppable: it was said to be the inevitable, desirable future of humankind. Thus the ultimate vision of Marx and Engels seemed ready to be realised.

What had not been anticipated were the internal divisions in the international communism. Trotsky, deported from the Soviet Union in 1928, argued that the October Revolution had been betrayed. After 1945 the schisms increased in number. The USSR and Yugoslavia condemned each other's variant of communism. The Chinese communists turned against the Soviet Union and denounced the Kremlin leadership as 'revisionist' – there was no sin greater for Marxist-Leninists than attempting to revise the unalterable precepts of the founders of Marxism. Only Albania was unconditionally on China's side. Troubles recurred in eastern Europe as governments sought to loosen the Soviet grip on their countries. As this was occurring, many communists tried to rethink the nature of a desirable communism. In western Europe, especially Italy and Spain, the communist parties start to chip away at the model offered by the USSR. 'Eurocommunism' was born. The ideology and politics of communism were far from being monolithic. There were almost as many variants of communism as there were communist states.