

Why did Communism survive in China but not in the USSR?

Written by anon

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The Communist Party in the Soviet Union and the Communist Party in China both had similarities. Among them were immoral leaders as well as effective leaders, a way of keeping their constituents in line, and the end of Communism as the party began with. However, among the few similarities both parties possessed the ultimate demise of Communism in the Soviet Union was their failure to adapt to times. The Soviet Union's miscalculation of national identity, the lack of a strong connection between Soviet led bloc states, and having a leader that supported Western-Democracy more than Communism were essentially the three paramount factors that led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and of Communism in it. While Communist China did have an immoral leader, Mao tse-tung, the Communist Party was able to adapt to the times by putting economic reform before political reform. Ultimately this historically brilliant move led by Deng Xiaoping was arguably what kept the Communist Party in rule in China for many years to come, among other things.

Before analyzing how Communism fell in the Soviet Union and succeeded in China, one must look at how they came to power first. While China had a historical uprising of the masses, namely the peasants, the Soviet Union did not have a revolution supported by the majority of the people. October 1st, 1949 was the date when the Communist Party in China officially came to power and established a China that was led by one party. However, it was a long process from a regime-change from the Qing Dynasty, similar to the change of regimes in the Soviet Union from Tsarist Russia. 1937 marked an important year for the Chinese, because it was the start of Communist ideology spreading to the masses. The Japanese are mainly acclaimed as the catalyst for the widespread of Communist thought in China, because the country invaded China in July 7th of 1937. During the years the Second Sino-Japanese War was being fought, puppet governments supported by the Communist Party were set up in rural villages. Peasants supported these governments because not only did they give them a say, but the governments "provided self-defense, education agricultural cooperation, support for full-time guerillas, and other needs of the villages".[i] Essentially these local institutions taught peasants the meaning of government, especially during times of war. In addition to teaching government, the mass movements endorsed by the Communist Party sparked "the feeling of belonging and of having a stake in government [which] grew up in this period".[ii] This was entirely novel to the Chinese masses; and it brought with an exhilarating sense of self-determination. As a result of the peasants' reaction to the local governments, the Communist Party in China gained massive support from the peasants. Moreover, the peasants of China had a significant influence under Mao's reign.

"Without the poor peasants it would never have been possible to bring about in the countryside the present state of revolution, to overthrow the local bullies and bad gentry, or to complete the democratic revolution. Being the most revolutionary, the poor peasants have won the leadership in the peasant association [...] This leadership of the poor peasants is absolutely necessary. Without the poor peasants there can be no revolution. To reject them is to reject the revolution. To attack them is to attack the revolution. Their general direction of the revolution has never been wrong".[iii]

The Communist ideology is one that is clearly widespread among the masses, and because of this its not only the most viable form of government for China but also the most productive. While China had a massive revolution from the bottom up, the Communist Party in the Soviet Union came to power without the masses.

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The way the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took power was far less emotional than the way the Chinese did. To begin with the people that were against the Tsarist Empire were largely upper class educated citizens, which were bred in the Russian institutions of higher learning in the 1860s.[iv] Unlike China, the majority was not involved in bringing the Communist Party to power. In fact the Soviet Communists came to power officially after the October Revolution, which was led by Vladimir Lenin. The Bolshevik Revolution led by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, which was a creation of Lenin, turned into the Communist Party, and essentially never changed. Unlike the Communist Party in China, one person created the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As Russian historian Richard Pipes adequately states, “The Bolshevik Party was Lenin’s creation: as its founder, he conceived it in his own image and, overcoming all opposition from within and without, kept it on the course he had charted”.[v] The Communist Party of China had many founders, its founders was an entire set of people, the peasants. Without them the Party could arguably never have come to power. Tsarist Russia had no need for a Communist Party, simply because the masses had more rights than they did in the Soviet Union. In fact

“all authoritarian regimes had market economies with relatively well defined private property rights, whereas none of the established communist regimes had a market economy or legally protected private assets of production before transition”.[vi]

Many historians argue that the October Revolution was merely a set back for Russia’s democratization, and that there should never have been a Communist rule in the first place.[vii] In addition to the introverted way Communism came to power in the USSR, its downfall can also be contributed to the Soviet Union’s inability to set up a national identity.

While the Soviets did not have an effective way of establishing national identity in the Soviet Union, the Chinese used their inclusive mindset and Confucius ideology to create a national identity everyone could relate to. While there were many ethnicities in China ranging from the incorporations of the Tibetans, Mongols, and Uyghurs in the 17th century, the Chinese government was able to keep all of these ethnicities under one ideology, namely Confucianism. However, in contemporary times the PRC states that China is a multi-ethnic state. In the Soviet Union on the other hand, there were far too many ethnic minorities in the state. What the Soviet Union attempted to achieve was a classless national identity by limiting everybody to one class, the Proletariats. Rather than recognizing that there were many ethnicities, like China did, the Soviet Union rejected the ethnicities and instead

“[the] non-Russian ethnics were systematically and firmly incorporated into the Soviet Union by the promotion of a proletariat class mentality. The development of the theory and policy of ‘Socialism in One Country’ thus served to forge the unitary national identity of the Soviet Union around the concept of common Soviet class identity”.[viii]

Prior to looking at the nationalism in the Soviet Union, the word “nation” should be defined first. Ronald Grigor Suny offers a good definition stating that a nation is

“a group of people that imagines itself to be a political community that is distinct from the rest of humankind, believes that it shares characteristics, perhaps original values, historical experiences, language, or any of many other elements, and on the basis of its defined culture deserves self-determination”.[ix]

According to this definition, the Soviet Union did not possess any kind of unity, because within the ethnic minorities and Soviet blocs, different languages were spoken, a different history applied for each state, and cultures varied between each ethnicity. The main reason for the Soviet Union’s attempt to categorize everyone under the Proletariat class was because the state lacked one. As Karl Marx clearly stated, Communism would not be achieved unless there would be an international revolution of the Proletariat class.[x] Evidently the Soviets’ attempt to spark an international Proletariat revolution failed. Professor of Chinese cultural studies Liu Kang at Duke University states that “the current Chinese communist government is more a product of nationalism than a product of ideology like Marxism and Communism”[xi]. Nationalism was a key component used by the CPC that was the glue in sticking the people to the party. Rightfully so, because the Chinese had gone through many invasions; dating back to the Sino-Japanese War, along with more recent underlying anti-west sentiment caused by western media’s coverage on Tibet, even during the Chinese Olympics. As Kenneth G. Lieberthal, from the University of Michigan accurately

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states, “the Western view is shaped by a notion of Shangri-La while the Chinese views are shaped by the assumption that Tibetans are backward, feudal, superstitious, and badly in need of modernization—Chinese style”.^[xii] Essentially, the problem at its core is that while China is a world-player, many in the West will not fully accept it as one, and will seek to humiliate China. A recent example is how western media tried to link the Olympics with protests in Tibet. Thus, while nationalism is the glue that keeps society and the government closely together for China, it can also ultimately lead to its downfall in the international community, and also affect the CPC’s legitimacy. Therefore, the Soviet Union in comparison to China did not possess a common history to which Soviet nationalism could arise.

Although the Soviet Union was not able to create a clear national identity with its constituents, and the Communist Party did not have the consent of the majority as it came to power, the key events that lead to the Soviet Union’s downfall and the survival of Communism in China were the reforms. Once Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary his political reforms Perestroika and Glasnost, both proved to be major failures within the Soviet Union. China on the other hand flourished with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Both leaders were different to begin with. It’s a common misconception that they were similar, because while Deng Xiaoping’s reforms proved to be a success, the reforms of Gorbachev were a failure. Moreover, Mikhail Gorbachev came from a 5th generation of Leninists. He was the first leader to be born after the October Revolution. On the other hand, Deng Xiaoping lived through the years of Mao, and was a Maoist himself. It’s indeed quite remarkable that a Maoist was able to change the entire social system.

“Because of Deng, globalization is no longer a choice, but a condition. Mikhail Gorbachev, celebrated for ending the cold war, closed the door on the 20th century through his miscalculations. By pursuing political reform before economic reform, he inadvertently dissolved the Soviet empire. Deng chose wisely, pursuing economic reform before political liberalization, and, in the farthest-reaching act of the 20th century, catapulted America’s most precious gift to humanity—our American system-cum-globalization—into worldwide majority status”^[xiii].

Thus the paramount different between the Soviet Union and China is that China placed an emphasis on the economy rather than on political reform. By having a strong economy, political reform come eventually. This system is much more viable, at least within a Communist government, because in order to have a good economy a country has to trade and be open to international activity. Simply with international activity, political reform will come. Simply looking comparing the CCP and the Communist Party in the Soviet Union one can see how the parties are ideologically different. Dr. Wei-Wei Zhang states that “even the most ardent reformer in China does not try to abandon the Party in carrying out reforms”.^[xiv] This notion not only points out the impeccable sense of pride the Chinese have for their countries, but it also points out a flaw of the Soviet model, in its final days. Mikhail Gorbachev seemingly did not carry his allegiance with the Communist Party, nor did he have a pragmatic mindset that would benefit the Soviet Union. Ultimately, while Gorbachev was accepted in the west for his democratic reforms, he was not accepted among his own people in the Soviet Union.

While there were many factors that contributed to the downfall of Communism in the Soviet Union, the main one was that during the 1980s nobody believed in it anymore; which was the key difference between the survival of Communism in China. In the 1980s the people did not trust the Communist ideology anymore. Quite frankly, once Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his liberal reforms of Glasnost, people were more inclined to talk to the government; in doing so the people spoke badly of the Communist government because they did not give the people what they promised. China on the other hand put less of an influence on controlling the entire country, and more of an influence on the economy. By putting less of an influence on control of the state, people remained happy with the government. In addition, new economic reforms that were being introduced, gave more economic freedom to the people of China. In addition, as already mentioned China had a truly mass movement with Communism, while the Soviet Union was largely created with the ideas of one man, Lenin. China’s pragmatic ideology can be seen in every corner of the country. The 5-year plans are a bold way of testing whether a specific policy is efficient for the country. The people of China trust and believe in their government. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, was a failed attempt at internationalizing Communism. Largely one man, Vladimir Lenin, which resulted in the Soviet government not adapting to times, influenced it. The Soviet Union miscalculated the national identity of the ethnicities it took under its wing. Political reform was put before economic reform, and this essentially resulted in the downfall of Soviet Union and of Communism therein.

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[i] Chalmers A. Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 3.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Bary, Chan, Watson, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, 1960), page 871.

[iv] Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 4.

[v] Ibid. 341.

[vi] Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994), 11).

[vii] Stephanie Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999), 39.

[viii] Ivan Szpakowski, "Socialism in One Country." http://www.janus.umd.edu/issues/sp07/Szpakowski_SocialisminOneCountry.pdf (last accessed 2007).

[ix] Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, "National" Identity, and Theories of Empire," *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[x] E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, vol. 2 (N.P.: Pelican Books, 1964; reprint, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), 48 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

[xi] Jayshree Bajoria, "Nationalism in China." http://www.cfr.org/publication/16079/nationalism_in_china.html (last accessed April 23, 2008).

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Thomas P. M. Barnett, "Deng Xiaoping," *Esquire* no. 4 (2008): 146.

[xiv] Wei-Wei Zhang, *Ideology and Economic Reform under Deng Xiaoping* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 2.

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