Comparing local communisms

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When President John F. Kennedy met General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev at their summit in Vienna in June 1961, he was explicitly warned by his advisers not to get involved in any ideological discussion. But their efforts were in vain: in their very first meeting Khrushchev managed to draw Kennedy into a long statement about the historical development of communism and its future prospects. And when he tried to express his concerns about the progress of Soviet controlled communist movements all over the world – think of Cuba! – Khrushchev coldly pointed out that there was here an *idea* at work. Ideas, Khrushchev said, could not be destroyed, and nor did they in any way stem from political or even military power. The United States, however, 'wanted to build a dam preventing the development of the human mind and conscience'. But if they tried to do this, he warned, it would lead only to dangerous conflicts.[1]

What we are witnessing in this argument by Khrushchev is the old universal pretension of marxism-leninism in the times of the Cold War. This universalism, according to Khrushchev, legitimated the activities of the Soviets and their local supporters in all the different parts of the world. And this was a long tradition. Lenin himself conceived Bolshevism as a universal movement whose philosophical insights, economic knowledge and social predictions could certainly be applied to all industrial countries, and ultimately to world history. While living in Munich, between September 1900 and April 1902, Lenin wrote his important work *What is to be done?* – a 'blueprint' not only for the Russian revolution but for all other Bolshevik revolutions to come. And the fact that Lenin was at this time living in Munich-Schwabing and thinking of the world revolution is in itself symbolic of the theme of this issue of the *Twentieth Century Communism* – local communisms.[2]

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Communists and fellow travellers have often claimed that their universalism originated in the Enlightenment, in its humanism and universal categories; in making the October revolution the Bolsheviks were explicitly continuing the universalism of the French revolution. Through their fusing of the idea of proletarian internationalism and the principle of revolution they created an overarching *lieu de mémoire* that generated a universal fascination. In 1919 Maxim Gorky formulated this through the words: '[t]he universal, the planetary significance of the Russian revolution'.[3] Because they had given the wheel of world history a decisive push forwards, the Bolsheviks and their leadership became the ultimate political and moral court of judgement for communists.

We do not here need to stress that this argument, from a philosophical and liberal perspective, leads in the wrong direction. Anyone who claims to represent the tradition of the Enlightenment needs to establish a system of reason *and* critique, of universal categories *and* empirical evidence. This marxism-leninism failed to do. In *What is to be done?* Lenin ridiculed the 'freedom of criticism' that was demanded by the social democrats: in his view, this demand was a strong indication of their 'decisive turn from revolutionary social-democracy to bourgeois social-reformism'.[4] Thus, neither in the history of communist countries nor in the communist movement could critique or unbiased evidence develop openly. So, communism was, at best, a corrupted derivative of enlightened universalism.

But today this kind of retrospective political and ideological judgment need occupy us no longer. The time when communism posed an ideological threat has gone. What is important and highly interesting in the question of communist universalism, though, is its implications for historiographical method and epistemology. In this article I will therefore first discuss the methodological implications of discussing such issues; and I will then look at some elements of local communisms that might potentially be important for comparative history; finally, I will make an assessment of the impact of such elements on the extent of political autonomy for local communisms.

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Methodological implications

Historians always face the problem of how to account for the universal and the particular. How are general ideas, generic notions, ideal types and so forth to be reconciled with individual cases, the micro level and concrete evidence? Or – looking at it from the other way round – how are individual cases, the micro level and concrete evidence to be read in the larger context? What is their meaning when seen against the background of general questions and problems? For methodological discussions such as these, the study of communism constitutes a perfect paradigm, because in communist history universal and particular elements are continuously intertwined in the object of study itself.

On the one hand, communism as it was ideologically conceived by marxism-leninism and institutionalised in the Communist International applied rules and created systems without any consideration for individual or local circumstances. Inevitably, however, the universal claim of communism encountered the very problems and difficulties that resulted from this claim. The history of the Communist International demonstrates, as it were, the impossibility of universalism. In its internal history and debates are continuously reflected the differences between cultures and nations, the wide range of individual beliefs, and the specificities of regional and local conditions. Indeed this history shows that the more a single standard of good is pursued, the more this effort leads to practices of force and repression.

On the other hand, when we study communist history at a regional and local level, the universal implications of communism are constantly surfacing. There is no local configuration in which the problems of communist universalism are not, in one way or another, represented. So – more than in most other fields of research – in communist history the historian has to take this tension into account. S/he needs continually to link the universal and the particular to each other in order to unravel the whole dynamics of the movement or the forces that block its development.

Before discussing some of the elements of this tension let us reflect for a moment on a theoretical possibility: could there be a manifestation of communist history in which its universal and particular elements

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are identical? This is conceivable in theory: it could come about in a situation whereby communism creates its own site, its own specific local environment, in which its universal principles are intended to be represented in their purest and most pristine form. This could be seen as being attempted in the cases of the socialist model city, planned in advance on the drawing-board. And, thanks to Stephen Kotkin's work, we can discuss what happened in the best-known of these model cities, Magnitogorsk in the south Urals, founded in 1929 under Stalin's first Five Year Plan and planned by the German architect Ernst May.[5] Magnitogorsk was designed as a giant production plant for heavy industries, and was built with enormous rapidity. It was conceived as a sort of ideal socialist city designed for the creation of the new socialist citizen. New and beautiful homes were to be built, with facilities for a healthy socialist balance between work and life. The reality, however, was very different. The city grew too rapidly, and tents were needed for the incoming workers. By the late 1930s, 450,000 people were living in a city that was characterised by extremely high performance expectations, poor living conditions, social repression, and even open terror against its population.

Another, less well-known, example is the East German city Eisenhüttenstadt, close to the German-Polish border, originally named 'Stalin-city'. Planned on the drawing-board and founded in 1950, Eisenhüttenstadt – like Magnitogorsk – was planned with a double function in mind. First, it was to provide East Germany with urgently needed steel; second, it was designed as a socialist paradigm of a city, mirroring the vision of the communist future. The style of its original architecture was a mixture of soviet influences and the German Bauhaus tradition. But, again, the reality did not reflect the socialist vision. Magnitogorsk and Eisenhüttenstadt both suffered from a lack of productivity; and in both cities the acute lack of housing and poor living conditions of the majority of the population contrasted sharply with the better position of the privileged members of the party's local nomenclature. Indeed, something that communist universalism had not theoretically envisaged – social inequality – was being practised at these particular communist sites.[6]

These examples of socialist model cities are useful in that they

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demonstrate strikingly the tension between universal communist principles and local practices. They show that even when communist universalism is locally created to the greatest possible extent, it is blurred by the inconsistencies of local realities. We can, therefore, expect to find an even bigger source of tension when we turn to local communisms in sites that were not self-created bolshevist environments.

This leads to the central question: what are the elements that make a particular communism local? And how do they shape the relationship between local communisms and the centre of communism, with its universalistic pretensions? While it is, of course, not possible here to discuss the question at length, we will concentrate on a few aspects that seem particularly significant.

Firstly, one of the most important regional and local factors that periodically complicated the history of communism as a universal movement was the nation, or the national question. For Lenin himself, and during the first years of the Communist International, national questions and differences seemed to be irrelevant. On the contrary, accentuating national questions was dangerous – nationalisms were seen as nothing but rivalries between different national capitalist bourgeoisies. Lenin's aim was accordingly to transform the First World War, which he considered as the most developed form of those rivalries, into a revolutionary civil war. Communist universalism was of its very nature to be internationalist.

From the theoretical point of view, the communist movement consisted of a multinational vanguard made up of ideologically trained political leaders who had devoted themselves to the universal goal of the proletarian world revolution. Their task was to analyse local conditions according to rational criteria and to draw the 'correct' conclusions from their analysis. In 1920, the Second Congress of the Comintern decided that the communist party 'should not advance abstract and formal principles on the national question, but should undertake first of all a precise analysis of the given environment, historical and above all economic'.[7] Things were, however, very different in practice. In the case of Soviet Russia itself, its own multinational structure and the resulting unavoidable emergence of a 'national question' posed a central challenge to communism. What attitude should ideological universalism

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take towards concrete national identities in the localities? How could a centralism based on universal ideas connect up with the aspirations and traditions of local ethnic groups, and with their leaders? From the very outset this problem was part of the history of communism, and the issue became ever more pressing as the peoples of the later Soviet Union put themselves in opposition to Bolshevik control. Earlier research into communism, under the influence of the Cold War, tended to imagine that there was an ideologically-based and thought-out master plan behind the subjection of the nations of the Soviet empire: it was assumed that Stalin in particular – the 'breaker of nations' – had deliberately turned the Soviet Union into a gigantic prison of the nations.[8] But more recent research has stressed the improvised character of the communists' earlier way of approaching the 'national question'. From this perspective, the actions of the Bolsheviks were marked by numerous tactical turns rather than offering evidence of a clear and purposeful plan to subjugate the nations living in the sphere of Bolshevik domination.[9]

The tension between ideological universalism and local national traditions also led to surprising tactical turns in the communist parties of countries outside the Soviet Union. Ben Fowkes has shown this very clearly with regard to the case of Czechoslovakia. At the their party's founding congress in May 1921, the Slovak communists declared: 'We stand for the unity of the Czechoslovak republic and we are decisively opposed to any autonomist attempts to split it up, which are only aimed at enslaving the proletariat, breaking up its centralised movement and allowing capital to act as it wishes'.[10] Four years later, the Comintern moved away from this universalist stance when it changed its tactics towards the multinational states of central and south-eastern Europe. After the failure of attempts at a revolutionary takeover in Germany and elsewhere in 1923, it was decided to continue United Front politics but with different partners, and the Comintern turned to those seeking national autonomy. Together with Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia was now considered a 'new small imperialist' state, in which the duty of the communists was to support 'the national separation of the oppressed peoples'. There was, the communists now said, 'no united Czechoslovak state'. On the contrary, 'that state consisted of Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Poles'. The Czech Communist Party now had to support the struggle

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of the Slovaks for independence. Czech communists initially opposed this tactical turn, and warned against 'mechanically transferring a solution correct in one state to another state without examining the concrete conditions'.[11] But shortly afterwards they had to give way to the pressure coming from Moscow, and they 'corrected' their line. The Czechoslovak party no longer accepted the 'bourgeois' conception of a 'Czechoslovak nation state', which, they said, only served to disguise colonial exploitation and the repression of Slovaks and Ruthenians.

This is a good example of how difficult it was for the communist movement to deal with local, national and ethnic questions. The tension between universal internationalism and local nationalism was never overcome. On the one hand, the Comintern and the Soviet Union tried to use national liberation movements for their own objectives. On the other hand, there was no room left for the free authentic development of local, regional and national movements. And it is not coincidence that at the end of the 1980s the metropolitan centres under control of the centralist party were challenged from the periphery in all communist countries. National aspirations, regionalism and localism contributed greatly to the downfall of communism in 1989, and to the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991.[12] As a result the collapse of communism brought with it the second great movement of secession in twentieth-century European history, the first having been after 1918. The breathtaking speed with which the peoples of the Soviet Union constituted themselves as political nations underlines once more that communism never succeeded in finding a lasting solution to the 'national question'.

Local communisms and the possibilities of comparative studies

More than anything else, then, the 'national question' contributed to the frequent resort to violence that resulted from the tension between communist universalism and local ethnicity, traditionalism and nationalism. And this question of violence is the second element of significance for a comparison between local communisms. There has been much research and writing in recent years on the tendency towards violence inherent in Bolshevism; but rather simplistic condemnations of the 'essential violence of communism' have now been replaced by more nuanced

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analyses.[13] These show that political violence took place above all in places where the state structure of the tsarist empire was traditionally weak, and where culturally and ethnically diverse communities were mixed up together. In the Russian Civil War in particular, areas dominated by violence tended to be those where state control was only exercised at a distance. Local forms of bolshevism – which during the Civil War often consisted of nothing more than a Cheka – tended towards acts of violence and cruelty in the course of asserting themselves against resistance deriving from an ethnic, religious or socio-cultural basis. As a result, the most murderous part of the Soviet Union was on its non-Russian periphery, where the tsarist empire had only ever possessed a limited capacity to impose its will: on the Russian and Polish borderlands, where there was a mutual escalation of Bolshevik terror and local counter-violence during the Civil War;[14] and in the Transcaucasian republics. Here Bolshevism initially served as an instrument for the power of local ethnic elites, before it became directed by Stalin towards violence against the local bastions of tradition.[15] The Russian and Polish borderlands and the Transcaucasian republics thus became the setting for Stalinist mass terror.

It is not disputed that communist violence was extremely pronounced in places where Bolshevik identity was particularly marked by world war and civil war. Of countries outside the Soviet Russian sphere of influence this was particularly true of Germany, where communists and left-wing socialists made Bolshevism as they conceived of it part of their own political identity – much more emphatically than did their comrades in other countries.[16] Political conflicts took a correspondingly violent course, for example in Berlin and Munich in 1919 or in the Ruhr district in 1920: in these cases communists joined in local attempts to mount uprisings. This set in motion a spiral of revolutionary violence stimulated by inflammatory rhetoric and counter-revolutionary violence organised by the state, which was in turn interpreted by the communists through the categories of a Bolshevik civil war identity.

Universalism and the question of local autonomy

In other places, the universalism of the victorious Russian revolutionaries came up against different local traditions and expectations that severely

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restricted its revolutionary power. This leads us to the third aspect that deserves attention when making a comparison between local communisms. In central and western Europe, communism developed in very different conditions from those in the Transcaucasian republics and Russian and Polish borderlands, where it was confronted with ethnically heterogeneous and culturally traditionalist regions that had kept their distance from the state. Further to the west communism emerged from a milieu that included long-established Marxist, left socialist and syndicalist traditions that also held very pronounced revolutionary expectations for the future. The result in most cases was that the existing organisations split. Only where reformist traditions exercised an undisputed hegemony over the workers' movement did the influence of communism remain narrowly restricted. (This was especially the case in Great Britain, where the reformist tradition of the Labour Party and the trade union movement prevented a large-scale split of the kind that occurred within its continental equivalents. The British labour tradition remained hegemonic and left little room for manoeuvre to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), even though its powers of mobilisation, especially among the unemployed, may have been underestimated.[17])

Elsewhere on the continent of Europe great tensions arose when the communist claim to universality met with strong local traditions, although in some countries at least the response was dynamic. In France, for example, and in particular in Paris, political opposition to the First World War was strongly sustained by syndicalist forces, which in 1917 generally welcomed the Russian revolution; most French syndicalists mistakenly perceived the revolution as being of a syndicalist nature, and regarded Bolshevism as a movement akin to revolutionary syndicalism. One result of this pre-existing tradition was that local communism in France itself remained strongly influenced by syndicalism. Although numerous syndicalists saw no place for themselves in a party that became increasingly dominated by a vanguard of political functionaries and harsh discipline, others continued to hope for a fusion of local syndicalism and Russian Bolshevism. The *Parti communiste français* (Communist Party of France, PCF) initially drew tremendous vitality from the syndicalist hope that Bolshevik theory and French practice might be combined together.[18] In the long run, however, the Bolshevism of the PCF offered

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no room to syndicalists who viewed trade union autonomy as an inviolable value, despite all their sympathy for communism. This was demonstrated by the great crisis of 1924 in the PCF, which culminated in the expulsion of the syndicalists.[19]

But in Paris itself, more deeply rooted local traditions also need to be taken into account. The history of the capital was inspirational for the revolutionary fantasy of French communists, and indeed the city could easily serve as a symbol for French communist identity. Beginning with the storming of the Bastille and culminating in the Commune of 1871, the 'people' of Paris had provided many examples of true revolutionary spirit. The communists regarded themselves as legitimate trustees of that tradition. In particular with regard to the Commune, which was – in line with Marx's own writings – interpreted as the first true class struggle between proletarian Paris and bourgeois reaction, the communists managed to monopolise the revolutionary tradition of Paris for their own ends. [20] By pushing away the socialists, whose own commemorative ceremony became reduced to a tiny annual gathering, the communists were able to pose as the sole inheritors of the Commune legacy. Every year, in the spring, they succeeded in rallying many thousands of supporters, sometimes as many as 50,000 of them, for the glorification of the victims of 1871. Paris continued to be regarded as the political vanguard of the country, as it had been in the past.[21]

Socio-political structures and economic conditions

Finally, we need to consider socio-political structures and economic conditions as specific factors affecting local communisms. The tension between marxist-leninist theory and economic practice can be traced back at least as far as pre-war Russia and the agrarian debate. For Lenin it was clear that Russia had many peculiarities that did not fit into classical marxist thought, which was deeply rooted in the (British) experience of industrialisation: Russia on the other hand was a backward and overwhelmingly rural country. Given the low level of industrialisation, peasants were the key group for any political movement. To overthrow the tsarist regime, therefore, workers and peasants had to work together hand in hand. This is the gist of Lenin's pamphlet *The*

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Agrarian Programme of Russian Social-Democracy, written in Munich in 1902.[22]

When, in the spring of 1919, seventeen years later, the Munich Soviet Republic was proclaimed, Lenin expected the Bavarian peasants to support the revolutionary government. On 27 April he enquired personally by telegram about the state of affairs there. Didn't the situation in Munich look very similar to that in Petrograd in October 1917? In brief, staccato phrases, he formulated the vital questions which in his view would decide the fate of the Bavarian revolution:

> Have you set up Councils of Workers and Agricultural Labourers in each part of the city? Have you armed the workers? Have you disarmed the bourgeoisie? Have you used supplies of clothing and other items to provide immediate all-round assistance to the workers and in particular to the agricultural labourers and small farmers? Have you expropriated the factories and wealth of the capitalists in Munich? Have you abolished the rent and mortgage payments of the small farmers, doubled or tripled the wages of the agricultural labourers and the unskilled workers, confiscated all the printing presses so as to be able to print popular leaflets and newspapers for the masses, introduced the Six Hour Day plus two or three hours' simultaneous employment in the state administration, and restricted the living space of the bourgeoisie in Munich, so as immediately to install workers in the dwellings of the rich? Have you taken all the banks into your hands, seized hostages from the bourgeoisie, introduced larger rations for the workers than for the bourgeoisie, and mobilised all workers without exception both for defence and to carry out ideological propaganda in the surrounding villages?[23]

Lenin was here questioning the Bavarians about measures of the kind he himself had propagated in the October revolution, and which he considered to be necessary in a predominantly agricultural region. But, though he had lived in Munich for more than a year and had gained considerable firsthand experience from this stay, he completely misjudged local conditions.[24] The peasants around Munich did not do anything to side with the communists. On the contrary, in boycotting the revolutionary city

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they contributed to its increasingly precarious supply situation. In 1920, during its Second World Congress, the Communist International specified that:

> The Communist Party arises almost everywhere as an *urban* party, as a party of industrial workers who for the most part live in towns. For the easiest and quickest possible victory of the working class it is necessary for the Communist Party to become not only the party of the towns but also the party of the villages. The Communist Party must develop its propaganda and its organisational activity among rural workers and the small and middle peasants. The Communist Party must work with especial care on the organisation of Communist cells in the countryside.[25]

In fact, however, as we know, Bolshevism never had a real chance of winning over the countryside outside Russia.

The 'agrarian question', then, is indicative of one of the most important aspects of the history of Bolshevism, because it highlights the fundamental differences between Russia and European countries where communism had also played a certain role. Bolshevism was invented by Lenin for agrarian and highly authoritarian tsarist Russia: that was where it started. But Russia was – in terms of social structure, economic conditions and political system – so different from western European countries that local communisms arising there would inevitably be different. Whether leftist or syndicalist, anarchist or utopian, the most important driving force in left movements in Europe was something else: at the root of communism outside Russia lay the horrific experience of the First World War, and the deep disappointment about what was considered to have been the utter failure of the working-class movement to prevent the war, or at least to have reconstructed a new and just society out of the disaster of war. Against this background, the Bolsheviks – who had given the wheel of world history a decisive push forward – had acquired an enormous amount of moral authority. But in the long run this was not enough to enforce the loyalty of many local followers, who were acting in a completely different environment and considered themselves to be more or less autonomous actors.

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This was particularly evident after the renewed radicalisation of communist tactics under the banner of the Third Period. In Paris, the ultra-left turn of the Comintern, decided on at its Sixth World congress in 1928, plunged the communists into a deep crisis. The rhetoric of the Third Period completely bypassed social realities, and completely failed to achieve its objectives in France. Communist workers were therefore increasingly repelled by the Comintern's 'ultra-left' tactics imposed from above; the PCF fell into complete isolation, with the result that the party was increasingly regarded as a kind of sect. A report on party organisation compiled in 1933 delivered a withering verdict on developments between 1928 and 1932. According to the report, the slogan of the Third Period, proclaiming that the situation was directly revolutionary, had led to a catastrophic policy of sectarianism, which could only be carried through by means of a massive intimidation of the party at the basis:

> Giving orders became a generalised practice; many youthful party cadres, who knew nothing of trade union work, and sometimes were not even enrolled in a trade union, brutalised the older cadres even in trade-union meetings, accusing them at random of opportunism.[26]

It was only in 1935, when the Comintern decided on the Popular Front tactic, that French communism could overcome its isolation and gain electoral ground in the heart of the French working-class movement.

In Germany and its capital Berlin, however, the Third Period met with very different political, social and economic conditions. Against the background of the Great Depression, the paradigms of the Third Period seemed to be plausible in terms of past experience. During the bitter economic crisis of 1930 to 1933, living conditions of the German proletariat seemed to confirm – unlike in France – that the Comintern was right to assert a connection between rationalisation, unemployment and political radicalisation. Furthermore, the fact that in Germany and its capital social democrats occupied public offices that were highly relevant for the maintenance of public order contributed strongly to the radicalisation of the local communist movement. After 1929, with the additional impetus of the economic crisis, mass unemployment and increasing impoverishment, the KPD achieved its greatest successes – at

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least as far as membership figures and election results were concerned: the party appeared to be having its best days. The language of the Third Period, which spoke of the progressive pauperisation of the working class and of 'social fascism', proved more convincing when economic depression was hitting hard, and a social-democratic government – as on the notorious May Day of 1929 in Berlin – was held responsible for drowning communist protest in blood.[27]

Autonomy of local actors?

The last question that needs consideration concerns the impact of Moscow's centralism on the autonomy of local communisms. Indeed, the question of the extent to which we can speak of the autonomy of local actors is certainly one of the most intriguing ones. This is reflected in the development of the historiography. Until 1989, and to some extent even after that period, research was rooted in the experiences of people who had actually lived this history. And the experience of bitter division, indeed the politico-ideological fragmentation of the working-class movement, had already played a formative role among those who had lived through it; while the potential for disappointment had carried on accumulating within the ranks of the working-class movement – and this remained the case right up to the period after the Second World War. These experiences had a lasting and obvious influence on earlier studies of the subject. There has, in particular, been an unmistakeable tendency to overcome the division of the working class *post festum*, by means of a heroic historiographical act; to seek to lay bare the untouched core of a 'genuine' and potentially united left working-class movement.

From this point of view, Bolshevism and Stalinism were seen as foreign bodies in the movement, preventing the autonomous development of any kind of local, regional or national left socialism or communism. For example, Hermann Weber, in his well-known and influential thesis about the stalinisation of the KPD, insistently points to the supposed existence of a 'democratic' communism of a Luxemburgist type, which he claims was dominant in the early years of the party. Only after 1924, he says, was this promising and locally autonomous tendency of German communism destroyed by Stalinisation.[28] Klaus-Michael Mallmann too,

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in his important study of the history of the KPD, sees a multiplicity of local 'left proletarian *milieux*' in action. They were, he says, much more resistant and vibrant than the Stalinisation thesis suggests.[29]

There are similar historiographical tendencies to be seen in France. In her ground-breaking work on the origins of French communism, Annie Kriegel put forward the thesis that the foundation of the PCF was in the final analysis 'accidental'. From this perspective, communism appears as an ultimately alien influence 'grafted' (*greffée)* onto the French working-class movement. This thesis has had a lasting impact on the subject, and has only been brought into question in any fundamental way in the last few years.[30]

But to the degree that interest in general in the history of the working-class movement has declined since the 1980s, previous antagonisms have to some extent lost some of their sharpness. This is even more the case now that more than twenty years have elapsed since the end of communism and the opening of the archives. At least fifteen years of stimulating research has demonstrated that locality indeed did matter. In Saxony for example, it was the existence of a strong social-democratic party that was crucial; and Norman LaPorte has shown how this factor decisively influenced the political action of the local communists, and at the same time polarised them.[31] Economic conditions – including factors such as the presence or absence of large plants – were an equally important influence on local communisms: for example it was much more difficult for militants to establish communist cells in big factories than in smaller workshops.

On the other hand, it is well known and must not be forgotten that democratic centralism was continuously at work at the *local* level. Moscow, the Comintern, its directives and its emissaries exerted a never ending pressure. Communism established an obligatory way of speaking and writing that helped to shape reality. It is not possible to regard this powerful and omnipresent language-system as merely a 'revolutionary façade'.[32] On the contrary, it was used again and again to play out the inner conflicts of local communist organisations and to exploit personal feuds. Hence the dangerous accusation of 'opportunism' often lacked any political meaning, especially on the local level; but it could be used as an effective weapon for getting rid of personal or political rivals.

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Certainly, we need to differentiate between the rank and file of the party and its full-time functionaries. Ordinary members could never be forced into carrying out activities they considered contrary to their own local interests. But if this sort of dilemma occurred too often, ordinary militants would simply leave the party. Especially in times of an ultra-left policy, there were many examples of the strength of local party organisations being compromised by such a bloodletting. And this was all the more true for the functionaries, who were subjected to the control of the party apparatus. In the long run, no politically active communist could escape a fundamental and very personal choice: either accept unconditional subservience to the will of Moscow or break with the movement. There was a constant tension between Moscow's universal claim to exercise control and the many different local actors whose actions were embedded in a mesh of independent traditions and expectations, motivations and dilemmas. It is necessary to study these local conditions in depth, because only by doing so can we comprehend the complex mechanisms of the communist movement, caught as it was between democratic centralism and local practice.

This is an expanded version of a key note speech at Twentieth Century Communism's *'Local Communisms' Conference at the University of Glamorgan, Cardiff, June 30/July 1, 2011.*

Notes

1. Gerhard Wettig (ed), *Chruschtschows Weltpolitk 1955 bis 1964*, vol. 3: Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011, pp192-3; David Reynolds, *Summits. Six Meetings that shaped the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen Lane**,** 2007, p202 and in general for the background of the Vienna summit.
2. Friedrich Hitzer, *Lenin in München. Dokumentation und Bericht*, Frankfurt am Main: Union-Druckerei und Verlagsanstalt 1977; see also Andreas Wirsching, 'Russland. Lenin in München', in Alois Schmid and Katharina Weigand (eds), *Bayern mitten in Europa. Vom Frühmittelalter bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich: Beck 2005, pp354-371.
3. Maxim Gorky, 'Soviet Russia and the Nations of the World', in *The Communist International*, May 1919, no.1, p146. In general, see François

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Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion. The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p62f.

4. Lenin, 'What is to be done', in idem, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961, Vol.5, pp. 347-530. Quoted from the Lenin internet archive, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf, p1.
5. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
6. Elisabeth Knauer-Romani, *Eisenhüttenstadt und die Idealstadt des 20, Jahrhunderts*, Weimar: VDG Verlag, 2000.
7. 'Theses on the national and colonial question adopted by the second Comintern congress, 28 July 1920', in Jane Degras (ed), *The Communist International 1919-1943. Documents*. Vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, p140.
8. Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954; Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, London: Penguin 1991.
9. See especially Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question 1917-23*, London: Macmillan, 1998; see also the case study, Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
10. Quoted in Ben Fowkes, 'To Make a Nation or to Break It: Communist Dilemmas in Two Multinational States', in Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan and Matthew Worley (eds), *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern. Perspectives of Staliniziation, 1917-53*, London: Palgrave, 2008, (pp206-225), p210.
11. Ibid, p215.
12. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp127ff.
13. One book which is not free of this fault is Stéphane Courtois et al (eds), *Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression*, Paris: Laffont, 1997. For a similar stance, see Jörg Baberowski, *Verbrannte Erde. Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt*, Munich: Beck, 2012.
14. See, among other works, Dietrich Beyrau, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg als Bewährungsprobe. Bolschewistische Lernprozesse aus dem "imperialist-

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ischen" Krieg', in *Journal of Modern European History* 1, 1, 2003, pp96-124; Piotr Wróbel, 'The Seeds of Violence. The Brutalization of an East European Region, 1917-1921', ibid, pp125-149; Felix Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens. Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905-1933*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012. Timothy Snyder describes the region in question as the 'Bloodlands', in which violence swung back and forth in an extreme manner between the Russian revolution, the German occupation, Stalinism, the Holocaust and the Second World War, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010. For a critique of this view see Jürgen Zarusky, 'Timothy Snyders "Bloodlands". Kritische Anmerkungen zur Konstruktion einer Geschichtslandschaft', in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 60, 1, 2012, pp1-31.

15. Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall. Stalinismus im Kaukasus*, München: DVA, 2003. Some of his theses are disputable. He interprets the Transcaucasian region as the place where Stalinism originated. It was, he says, borne for the most part out of rural 'cultures of violence', which then spread to the whole region, which became in turn a vast field for experiments of this kind.
16. Andreas Wirsching, 'Violence as discourse? For a "linguistic turn" in communist history', in *Twentieth Century Communism. A journal of international history* 2, 2010, p21f.; Eva Oberloskamp, *Fremde neue Welten. Reisen deutscher und französischer Linksintellektueller in die Sowjetunion 1917-1939*, München: Oldenbourg, 2011, pp399-400.
17. Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class. The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
18. This is exemplified in Gaston Monmousseau, *La Dictature du Prolétariat, Paris 1922, and Le Syndicalisme devant la Révolution*, Paris: Edition de la 'Vie Ouvrière', 1922. See also, Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January-May 1920: New Syndicalist Ideas and Emergent Communism', in *French Historical Studies*, 12, 1981/82, pp508-540, esp. pp536ff; Kathryn E. Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy. Trade Union and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War I*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986, p153; idem, 'La tradition révolutionnaire entre syndicalisme et communisme dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres, in *Le Mouvement social*, 129 April-Juni 1987, pp27-50.

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19. Michel Dreyfus, *PCF. Crises et dissidences. De 1920 à nos jours*, Brussels: Éditions complexes, 1990, p21ff.
20. Karl Marx, 'The Civil War in France, The Third Address, May 1871': 'And yet, this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle class – shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants – the wealthy capitalist alone excepted'. Quoted from: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch04.htm.
21. For details, see Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918-1933/39. Berlin und Paris im Vergleich*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999, pp334-342.
22. 'The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the Russian Revolution', in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1961, pp107-150. Internet resources available in the Lenin internet archive: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1902/agrarian/index.htm.
23. 'Lenin's telegram of 27 April 1919', quoted in Hitzer, *Lenin in München*, p433.
24. Ibid, p246.
25. 'Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International, Petrograd, July 19-August 7 1920: Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution, no. 19', www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm.
26. Archives de l'Institut des Recherches Marxistes, Paris (AIRM), no.613, 'Rapport sur l'organisation du PCF 1928-1932' [1933], p13.
27. For more details, see Wirsching, *Weltkrieg*, pp378ff. For a comparative view of European (and Asian) communisms under the Third Period, see the contributions in Matthew Worley (ed), *In Search of Revolution. International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
28. Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus. Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik, 2 vols*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969.
29. Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik. Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996.

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31. Norman LaPorte, *The German Communist Party (KPD) in Saxony, 1924-33: Factionalism, Fratricide and Political Failure*, Bern, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003.
32. Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p3.

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