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# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

## *Learning from Communism's Fall*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

From its birth in 1917 until its death last summer, Soviet communism had a profound impact on Western political thought and behavior. The Soviet Union was not just another nation, but history's first fully "socialist" society. The Russian Revolution, Martin Malia, a professor of Russian history at Berkeley, notes in *Commentary* (Oct. 1991), became "the great polarizing event in 20th-century politics," turning the division between Left and Right into a chasm. And a chasm it remained, despite all the evidence over the decades that the Soviet regime was on a moral plane with Hitler's Third Reich. As late in the Cold War as 1983, when President Ronald Reagan declared the Soviet Union an evil empire, many liberal Americans scoffed. Yet just a few years later, the masses of people who lived in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe made it clear that they had had quite enough of the great "socialist" experiment. Reagan was proven correct, U.S. Senator Robert Kerrey of Nebraska said last September in announcing his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination; indeed, he added, "we are seeing that the evil was worse than most imagined." The final collapse of Soviet communism thus throws a harshly revealing light not only on what happened *there* during the decades past, but on what happened *here*, in the thoughts and actions of liberals and conservatives, of academics and makers of U.S. policy.

In recent decades, scholarly study of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Third World has been strongly influenced by "a [revisionist] school of thought that . . . exaggerated the achievements of communism and belittled its failures," Walter Laqueur of the Center for Strategic and International Studies contends in *Par-*

*tisan Review* (No. 3, 1991). "While Lenin's mistakes and Stalin's crimes were not denied, it was argued that by and large, and in a long-term perspective, these were less significant than the political, social, and economic achievements of the communist regimes." Such misjudgments, Laqueur says, were made not just by the Left but also by "the political and academic establishment, the media, and even Western intelligence—as shown, until very recently, by the erroneous estimates of the Soviet and East European economies."

When the Cold War was being fought, liberals did not always regard communist regimes with sympathy or sneer at "cold warriors." President John F. Kennedy, for example, on taking office in 1961, proclaimed U.S. willingness to "pay any price, bear any burden . . . to assure the survival and the success of liberty." And his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, plunged America into what was often described as "the liberals' war" in Vietnam. But after the 1960s, American liberals contributed little to the West's Cold War victory, argues *National Interest* editor Owen Harries in

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*Commentary* (Oct. 1991). “[T]oo many of them are on record as disputing the reality or the point of the Cold War, too many have argued for accommodation, too many have found it difficult to condemn the Soviet system—have even praised it and maintained it was not very different from ours—too many of them have done all these things for them now to be able to claim responsibility for the victory with any conviction.”

One group that does deserve major credit, Harries says, is the U.S. policymakers of the mid- and late-1940s—Dean Acheson and the other “wise men,” many of them liberals, who devised the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Bretton Woods agreement, and the strategy of containment. “There was nothing inevitable about containment, and there was nothing inevitable about the economic recovery of Europe and Japan and the phenomenal development of world trade—they were all politically contrived. If they had not been, there would have been nothing inevitable about the collapse of communism, either.”

After the Vietnam War, however, it was mainly the conservatives who carried the ball. They staunchly supported deterrence and ample defense budgets, and, writes Harries, “never equated concern about the Soviet threat with ‘paranoia’ and ‘obsession,’ as many liberals did.” Conservatives correctly perceived Soviet totalitarianism as “an unmitigated evil that had to be fought at all costs.” Still, their vision was not perfect, he concedes. They “often exaggerated the extent and durability of Soviet power and the threat it represented.”

In that exaggerated view of the Soviet bear, conservatives had many scholarly specialists for company. “In retrospect,” writes University of Vermont historian Robert V. Daniels in the *New Leader* (Sept. 9–23, 1991), “perhaps Sovietology’s greatest fault was grossly overestimating the strength of the Soviet bloc—its physical and economic capabilities as well as its political cohesion and psychological stamina.” W. R. Connor, director of the Na-

tional Humanities Center at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, contends in the *American Scholar* (Spring 1991) that Western Sovietologists peered at Soviet reality through the thin slit of social science and missed “the passions—the appeal of ethnic loyalty and nationalism, the demands for freedom of religious practice and cultural expression, and the feeling that the regime had simply lost its moral legitimacy.”

In the 1970s, Laqueur notes, it became bad form in liberal academic and political circles even to use the term *totalitarianism* in reference to the Soviet system. In the Soviet Union itself, he observes, there is today no such reluctance.

It would be unrealistic, in Laqueur’s view, to expect “a collective admission of guilt in Western revisionist thought. To own up to mistakes is a painful process.” Many of those who argued for years that the United States was at least as much to blame for the Cold War as the Soviet Union will not soon abandon their position, he notes. “It has already been said that there have been no winners and losers, for America has ruined herself in the course of an unnecessary arms race—not to mention the domestic political and psychological damage that has ensued—resulting in the militarization of our thinking and our political culture.” That view, Laqueur says, belongs in a satirical novel; it will not “cut much ice” outside the circles of those scholars and journalists who feel compelled to defend their record.

Leftist academics such as economist Samuel Bowles of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, are trying to accentuate the positive. The demise of communism in Eastern Europe, he writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Apr. 4, 1990), was “the end of a nightmare, not the death of a dream.” No longer will the “bureaucratic centralism and official Marxism of Eastern Europe [be] an albatross around the necks of the Left in U.S. universities.” U.S. socialists, he says, never had “public ownership [or] the end of the market [as their] objective . . . . They were a possible *means* to the end of fairness and democracy.”

Sociologist Paul Hollander, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 23, 1990), is not convinced. In academe, Marxism has come to serve "as a stick with which to beat Western pluralist-capitalist systems and their cultures . . . . Our Marxist academics knew little about existing socialist societies and were not in the least [eager] to learn more or to criticize them; they were afraid that such criticism might put them in the unsavory company of 'cold warriors' or 'red bashers.'" The fall of communism is no more likely to disturb their faith than did its dismal record of performance in decades past.

In the view of William G. Scott and David K. Hart, co-authors of *Organizational Values in America*, the collapse of communism ought to call into question the ideology of "managerialism." The communist regimes, they write in *Society* (Mar.-Apr. 1991), "were managed societies, and their managers proved incapable of satisfying the aspirations of the people . . . . We too

are a managed nation . . . ."

Be that as it may, it is the status of socialism that is now most at issue. Princeton's Paul Starr, co-editor of the liberal *American Prospect* (Fall 1991), is hopeful that liberals will now face up to that reality. It is finally time, he says, for liberals to cut loose from socialism, even socialism of the democratic sort. "It is now indisputable that communism impoverished the people who lived under it, and it is not clear how or why a more democratically planned socialist economy would do much better—or that such a system is feasible at all." Now, liberals must focus on the reform of capitalism. "Whatever the party of reform once may have had to learn from the ideas of socialism, it has already absorbed; indeed, some of what it learned, it ought to unlearn. Those who have believed socialism to be a higher stage of liberalism now need to take to heart, not the great vision of socialist theory, but the bitter disappointment of the practice."

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## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

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### *Dry Rot?*

"The Fragility of Liberalism" by Christopher Lasch, in *Salmagundi* (Fall 1991), Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. 12866.

In the very hour of its greatest triumph, in the very nation that has been its champion, liberal capitalism is in an alarming state of decay. "[T]he signs of impending breakdown are unmistakable," warns Lasch, an iconoclastic historian and author of *The True and Only Heaven* (1991). "Drugs, crime, and gang wars are making our cities uninhabitable. Our school system is in a state of collapse. Our [political] parties are unable to enlist the masses of potential voters into the political process." And the emerging U.S.-dominated global culture, far from reflecting a regard for human dignity and other liberal values, is "the culture of Hollywood, rock and roll, and Madison Avenue . . . a culture of hedonism, cruelty, contempt, and cynicism."

This dangerous state of affairs Lasch

partly blames on the allegiance of liberals—classical and modern—to the false god of unending progress. Their commitment led during the past century to the creation of a consumer society and to the centralization of economic and political power, which robbed citizens of their independence. But since the American Revolution, liberals have made another big mistake, in Lasch's view. They have imagined, with Virginia political theorist John Taylor (1753–1824), that a properly designed political system alone would ensure the health of American society, that a society's institutions "may be virtuous, though the individuals composing it are vicious."

By the 19th century, liberals were left with only one prop for civic virtue: The obligation to support a family, they