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McDonald observes, "though the presidency has become almost impossible to manage, and though the caliber of the people who serve as chief executive has declined erratically but persistently from the day George Washington left office," the presidency continues "unparalleled in its stability" as a "model of order and sanity." Americans have elevated 41 different people to the White House, and in the process let control of the executive office go from one party to another 21 times, but only once, in 1861, has the nation come apart. Peaceful transfers are the norm, and the office remains, remarkably, "fundamentally true to the original design."

**THE SOVIET TRAGEDY: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991.** By Martin Malia. Free Press. 575 pp. \$24.95

**IMPERIUM.** By Ryszard Kapuscinski. Knopf. 331 pp. \$24

The collapse of the Soviet Union has drawn Sovietologists into one of history's great whodunits: Did the Soviet Union kill communism, or did communism kill the Soviet Union? To Malia, a former professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, communism is clearly the culprit. His argument here expands and updates his widely discussed 1990 article, "To the Stalin Mausoleum," published in *Daedalus* under the pseudonym "Z." He charges that those who believe that Stalin's crimes were an aberration of Leninist thought, or that Soviet communism could be successfully reformed, get things exactly wrong.

In Malia's view, Western Sovietologists failed to foresee communism's inevitable demise because they ignored the study of ideology for the more neutral and "scientific" study of social and economic forces. They refused to recognize that the Bolsheviks imposed Marxism on Russia in a utopian "revolution from above" that necessitated thorough and relentless destruction of the existing social and economic order. Every time Lenin, Khrushchev, and, finally, Gorbachev were forced by economic exigencies to adopt market-based "reforms," they amplified the contradictions between communist theory and reality. "If in the end communism collapsed like a house of cards," writes Malia, "it was because it had always been a house of cards."

Malia's complaint about the myopia of most Sovietologists is shared by Kapuscinski, the peripatetic Polish journalist whose previous books include quirky reports on politics in Ethiopia during the last years of Emperor Haile Selassie and in Iran under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Kapuscinski would also agree with Malia that communism killed the Soviet Union. But Kapuscinski sees a far greater connection between the fear and fatalism of "Homo Sovieticus" and that of his Russian forebears. Comparing the eras of Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev with those of Peter I, Catherine II, and Alexander III, Kapuscinski asks: "In what other country does the person of the ruler, his character traits, his manias and phobias, leave such a profound stamp on the national history, its course, its ascents and downfalls?"

Kapuscinski, however, is more intent on offering an impressionistic tour of the Soviet "imperium" than on arguing about its theoretical origins. This he does through vividly evoked encounters with intellectuals in Moscow, coal miners above the Arctic Circle, and ex-fishermen near the shrinking Aral Sea. Some readers may find his meditations on the making of cognac in Tbilisi irrelevant. But more often than not his offbeat observations cast new light on the curious dystopia that was the Soviet Union. Commenting on the miles of barbed wire he saw in his travels, Kapuscinski notes: "If one were to multiply all this by the number of years the Soviet government had been in existence, it would be easy to see why, in the shops of Smolensk or Omsk, one can buy neither a hoe nor a hammer, to say nothing of a knife or a spoon."

At journey's end, Kapuscinski describes the impact of new freedoms on the former Soviet Union but concludes that "the so-called Soviet man is first and foremost an utterly exhausted man. . . . We shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't have the strength to rejoice in his newly won freedom." Malia agrees. After "70 years on the road to nowhere," he writes, a Russia rendered prostrate by the total collapse of its "total system" must simultaneously create a liberal economic order, a democratic polity, and a viable nation-state.

One may take issue with Malia's tidy intellectualism, which gives short shrift to the role of individual error, pettiness, vainglory, and other human traits in the rise and fall of communism. But by demonstrating the animating power of

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“maximalist” socialist ideology and its ultimately fatal consequences, Malia has not only recast the historiography of the Soviet Union, but posed a powerful intellectual challenge to any attempts to revive socialism as the solution to inequity.

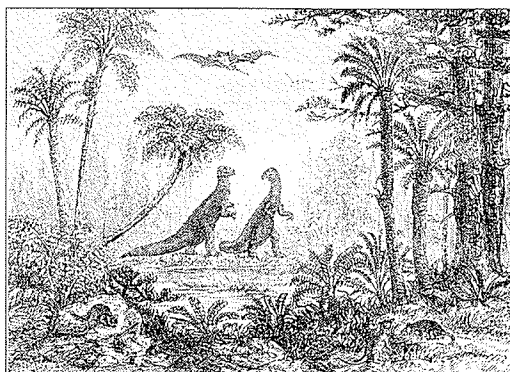
## Science & Technology

**THE MASS-EXTINCTION DEBATES: How Science Works in a Crisis.** Ed. by William Glen. Stanford Univ. Press. 370 pp. \$49.50

Why did dinosaurs and many other large lifeforms suddenly vanish from the earth 65 million years ago? For decades, the mystery bedeviled paleontologists studying the fossil record. In 1980, however, geologist Walter Alvarez, his father Luiz (a Nobelist in physics), and a team of University of California scientists published a radical hypothesis to explain unusual concentrations of rare iridium they found in clay beds dating from the period of the dinosaur extinctions. Their proposal: A meteor, 10 kilometers across and rich in iridium, had struck the earth, filling the skies with dust that chilled the planet and doomed the dinosaurs.

As the first testable hypothesis on the subject, the impact theory should have been allowed a respectable day in the scientific marketplace. Instead, says Glen, a visiting scientist and historian at the United States Geological Survey, too many scientists rejected it out of hand. Volcanists dismissed it because it competed with their own theory—that an unprecedented level of volcanic activity was responsible for the iridium dust, having spewed it up from the earth’s core. Other scientists rejected it simply because non-paleontologists had proposed it. And doubters threw up a host of obstacles, demanding that the impact camp provide impossible kinds of proof—measurements beyond the capabilities of existing scientific instruments, for instance—and challenging them to locate the impact site.

Eventually, after a publishing boomlet produced more than 2,500 papers and books on the impact theory, scientists ended up accepting or rejecting it based on their respective loyalties. Indeed, the pace of the new discoveries, theories, and countertheories was such that, as Glen remarks,



“only few [scientists] could keep abreast.” Many ended up relying on what they read in popular magazines and scientific journals, which, according to Glen, often printed “poorly informed and biased commentary.”

Another contributor to this volume, paleontologist Digby McLaren, points out that the reception of the impact theory followed the same pattern as that given other initially controversial theories—Charles Darwin’s 1859 theory of evolution, for instance, and Alfred Wegener’s 1912 theory of continental drift. Most scientists rejected those theories outright, and it was only after considerable experimentation and study that they were reluctantly accepted. Similarly, the impact theory is now finally receiving more open-minded consideration. Indeed, most scientists today agree that one large object—and possibly more—striking the earth either triggered the dinosaur extinctions or contributed greatly to them.

Of course, scientists should be skeptical of new theories, and should insist that they be bolstered by accurate evidence, particularly when they represent radical breaks with tradition. But challenging ideas deserve to be tested in the laboratory or the field—not in conferences and the media under a cloud of hostility and doubt. As Glen concludes during a conversation with paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, the scientific community ought to be “a guarantor of objectivity,” and yet time and again scientists greet new theories by imposing “subjectivities, and their power to do so seems to fly in the face of their philosophic purpose and stated goals.”