CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On March 14, 1990, a majority of the 2,250 members of the Soviet Union’s one-year-old parliament, the Congress of People’s Deputies, voted to amend Article VI of their country’s constitution. The old article had been neat, compact, and to the point. It specified what had long seemed self-evident and nonnegotiable: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was “the leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system and of all state organizations and social organizations.” Furthermore, the CPSU was “armed with Marxist-Leninist doctrine.” So equipped, the party’s purpose was to impart to the Soviet people a “planned and scientifically-sound character to their struggle for the victory of communism.”¹ In contrast, the delegates to the Congress of People’s Deputies saw the CPSU quite differently. Their description of the party in the new version of Article VI could not have been more ambiguous. They voted to include the CPSU in the document, but only as one of various unspecified political parties, trade unions, public organizations, and mass movements. Unlike in decades past, its representatives would have to seek office in competition with other parties and, as in all political systems governed by the rule of law, they would be subject to the parliament’s decisions. Most revealing, the revised article made no reference to the party’s leading role.²

We cannot help looking back with astonishment at the decisiveness and finality of this change. Although two of the Soviet Union’s allies, Hungary and Poland, had essentially cast aside the principle of single-party rule one year earlier in spring 1989, the significance of these events only became fully apparent when waves of protest and popular disaffection with communist rule resulted in the elimination of similar constitutional clauses in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria.
In response, Soviet authorities struggled to prevent the contagion from spilling into their country. At the parliament’s preceding session in mid-December 1989, CPSU general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and his coleaders tried to keep Article VI off the agenda. When prominent deputies, like the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and the physicist-turned-human-rights-activist Andrei Sakharov, demanded that the party be divested of its sacrosanct character and forced to test its reputation at the voting booth, Gorbachev fought back. The Congress had more pressing topics to address, he insisted. “We don’t need to act in this matter as if it were an emergency,” the general secretary declared. “Why all this drama? We must approach the matter of constitutional changes with great responsibility.”

Nonetheless, this was an emergency, and Gorbachev knew it. His party’s existence was in jeopardy. For more than a decade, the CPSU leadership had been painfully aware that many of its rank-and-file members no longer believed their organization was worth defending in its current form. Indeed, only a month earlier, when more than 200,000 protestors took their demands for multiparty elections into the streets of Moscow, one could easily find CPSU members among the marchers. Thus, if not by his words then by his actions, Gorbachev showed on the day after the amendment of Article VI that he recognized how much the world had changed. He allowed the People’s Congress to elect him as the Soviet Union’s first and—it would transpire—last president.

When he delivered the CPSU’s official report four months later at its Twenty-Eighth Congress in July 1990 in this new capacity, his position as general secretary of the party was no longer the primary source of his authority and his relationship with his longtime comrades was qualitatively different. One year later, following an abortive military coup, Gorbachev resigned from the CPSU leadership and, as president, ordered the abolition of all party posts in the government. For all intents and purposes, both in the Soviet Union and in a majority of countries like it, the party was finished.
Introduction

An Idea before an Organization

What was the communist party? At first glance, the answer to this question seems straightforward. If we go by the doctrinal definition that the Soviets associated with the leader of the Bolshevik revolution, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and formulated under Joseph Stalin’s rule, a communist party is a revolutionary organization committed to the forcible overthrow of capitalism. Its goal is to replace the rule of the bourgeoisie with a socialist dictatorship of the proletariat, which leads the way toward the attainment of a classless, communist society. Its “Leninist” or “Marxist-Leninist” members must be selfless individuals who care only about the common cause and adhere unquestioningly to the party’s command. Equipped with the insights of revolutionary figures like Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Lenin, they will bring truth to the proletariat and educate them about their real interests. With the vanguard’s guidance, the working masses will fulfill their historical destiny by rising up and overthrowing their oppressors. Because these workers “have no country,” a revolution in one part of the world will inevitably be followed in other countries once they have an advanced proletariat.

The parties that described themselves in these formal terms left an indelible mark in the twentieth century. When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, their members could legitimately count themselves as participants in a global institution. For more than a century, and long before the advent of the phenomena that we associate with globalization today—international currency flows, supranational corporations, the Internet, and social media—the communist party could be found everywhere. It reached across continents and into disparate countries, sprawling urban centers and tiny peasant villages, crowded factories and university discussion circles. Out of the 162 countries in the world in 1985, twenty-four were ruled by communist parties. This number compares favorably with the thirty-five countries that were governed by communism’s primary global competitor, liberal democracy. At the same time, approximately 38 percent of the world’s population lived under communist regimes (1.67 billion out of 4.4 billion). The CPSU’s International Department officially recognized 95 ruling and nonruling...
communist parties. Overall, if one includes the 107 parties with significant memberships, there were approximately 82 million communist party members worldwide.⁴

Nevertheless, even someone with a casual acquaintance with the history of world communism will immediately recognize the challenge of sorting out the relationship between these figures and the revolutionary organs that people like Marx, Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro envisioned.⁵ Unless they were imposed by an external force, few communist parties found their way to power as a result of the popular upheavals that the founders of the movement anticipated. In those cases when indigenous parties came to power, such as in China, Yugoslavia, and Vietnam, even fewer were based on the actions of the proletariat. A majority rose in developing countries and their success was heavily dependent on the engagement of nonworking-class strata, especially the peasantry. Furthermore, in both imposed and indigenous revolutions, the result was not a dictatorship by the formerly oppressed majority. It was a dictatorship of the party over the whole society.

This circumstance presents a puzzle to students of politics and history. How could an institution that made such a huge mark on the world have been significantly different from what its progenitors imagined—and still flourish? In this book, I shall argue that we can only resolve this question if we wean ourselves off the notion that the party should only—or, in many cases, even primarily—be understood as a formal organization. When we look back on the history of world communism, what stands out in many of the most prominent cases, including the Soviet Union and China, is that there were communists or left-wing radicals who would become affiliated with these movements long before the party acquired standardized rules and regulations. A majority had little or no experience with politics. They were not bound to the doctrinal conception of the communist party that I have sketched above. Instead, they were motivated by an evolving body of beliefs about what needed to be done to stage a successful revolution and what should come afterward. In fact, many of the communist parties that I shall consider in this book—in Russia, China, Italy, Germany, and others—were initially distinguished by their leaders’ engagement in open deliberation and debate over their missions and tactics.
It is no accident that this fluid understanding of revolutionary leadership had enormous staying power. The idea of the communist party’s leading role was born, nurtured, tested, and transformed in turbulent times. Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, one could find reasons for the wholesale rejection of the status quo everywhere. Establishment institutions failed to prevent human catastrophes that were occurring on a scale the world had never seen—world wars, civil wars, mass demonstrations, peasant uprisings, foreign invasions, and full-scale economic collapse. The youthful idealists, intellectuals, artisans, religious and ethnic minorities, and women’s activists who threw themselves into revolutionary activity over these decades had many suitors—anarchists, syndicalists, populists, utopian socialists, terrorists, and fascists. But none could compete with the global appeal of the communist party. The idea of the vanguard simultaneously provided its adherents with three powerful reasons to follow its command: the confidence that they were part of a progressive movement that was destined to succeed, the satisfaction of serving a cause that was superior to themselves, and the pride of being associated with a drama of grand historical proportions.

Almost uniquely among modern political parties, the early conception of the communist party was based on the conviction of many revolutionaries that their victory was inevitable. In the party’s embryonic period, the movement’s foremost thinkers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, outlined a theory of human relations that was tantalizingly simple. In their depiction, the coming revolution was preordained by an unresolvable contradiction between the interests of a minority class that controlled the means of production and a majority of workers whose labor was exploited in the never-ending pursuit of profit. Initially, the proletariat had no choice but to accept this condition. But eventually, the contradictions between these classes would become so unbearable that the working class would be propelled into overthrowing the existing system of production.

In fact, Marx and Engels’s specific predictions were only realized, if at all, in a few isolated circumstances. Yet, this circumstance did not present communist leaders with an insurmountable dilemma. To the contrary, as I shall show throughout this book, the message they
bequeathed about the ineluctable victory of an oppressed majority over an oppressive minority provided future generations of revolutionaries with a lasting resource. The “family resemblance” of this dichotomy to other, equally profound conflicts between majorities and minorities in their own countries, such as those between peasants and landowners, nationalist liberators and colonial administrations, and patriots and invaders, enabled those who called themselves “Marxists” to characterize their causes as worthy of support in the fight.6 Their leaders did not always act on the possibilities afforded by these dichotomies. Still, they were available as lifeboats to carry their movements forward.

In addition, the idea of the communist party was attractive because it offered a sense of community and belonging in times when human relationships were fractured by social unrest and war. In return for the privilege of being a part of this community, party members were willing to sacrifice their individuality to the collective enterprise of discerning the path to a just society. The annals of communism are replete with evidence of the seriousness with which this holy “first communion” was taken.7 Consider the words of Milovan Djilas, one of the preeminent figures in post–World War II Yugoslav politics and an equally influential dissident in later years, when he described the intoxicating impact of this shared agenda. “My own fate was of no account compared to the struggle being waged,” he related, “and our disagreements were of no importance beside the obvious inevitability of the realization of our idea.”8

The corollary to this moral obligation was the undeniable and often horrifying extent to which party members could consciously justify sacrificing their fellow believers in the name of the common cause. Two decades after Djilas’s confession, Julia Minc, the former head of the Polish Press Agency and vice president of the State Employment Commission, defended this principle when asked about the execution of innocent party members: “If you have to choose between the party and an individual, you choose the party, because the party has a general aim, the good of many people, but one person is just one person.”9

Finally, the party members’ belief in the inevitability of the revolution and willingness to subordinate their private interests to the good of the whole were based upon the assumption that they would not abuse
their positions. They had the privilege of leading this movement simply because they, more than others, were equipped to discern the interests of the people. “We communists,” Joseph Stalin declared in 1926, “are people of a special mold. We are made of a special stuff. . . . There is nothing higher than being a member of the party whose founder and leader was comrade Lenin.” At the same time, he admonished, each member was obliged to uphold Lenin’s bequest “with honor.” To be sure, Stalin would vigorously violate this principle in later years. But the idea of the virtuous party would live on.

The Idea and the Organization

The conception of the communist party as a revolutionary idea can account for the loyalties of its early members. But it cannot account for how these loyalties were sustained. In the face of this challenge, the greatest weakness of Marx’s prophecies and those of other early communists is their foundation on a conception of time that placed the attainment of their dream at an unspecified future date. We can hardly fault nineteenth-century thinkers for this lack of specificity. Marx and his contemporaries’ greatest contribution is the assertion that history marches according to a progressive logic. The fact, however, that the promised land lies in the distant future means that the leaders of parties that come later are particularly dependent on having the right conditions to convince their members that they should press ahead.

In times of turmoil, these parties’ calls for sacrifice make sense. Their members have “nothing to lose but their chains” and “a world to gain.” The difficulties arise when adverse conditions abate. They not only test their leaders’ skills in convincing their members that their ideals are worth the price of loyalty, they also force them to make a difficult choice. They can identify new reasons to demand ideological vigilance and a reinvigoration of the class struggle by invoking specters like the class enemy, hidden saboteurs, and imperialist aggressors. Or they can adjust the terms according to which the transition to a new society takes place.

These changing circumstances set up an unavoidable conflict between two conceptions of the party, one as an idea and the other as an
organization. Those communists who emphasize the first conception maintain that the process of building socialism and making the eventual transition to communism will remain long and arduous. In their view, even parties that have successfully attained power will need to maintain revolutionary vigilance in the face of continuing threats from domestic and imperialist aggression. During this "state of simmering war, a state of military measures of struggle against the enemies of proletarian power," as Lenin observed in one of his last essays, the party is justified in doing whatever is necessary to defend its achievements.

Conversely, those communists who emphasize the organizational features of the party contend that one cannot allow the focus on revolution to preclude the formation of established routines to hold their movement together, including meaningful membership requirements, regular meetings, and consistent standards of decision making. Moreover, they maintain that if the party is weak and threatened with obsolescence, its leaders may have to accommodate themselves to working with established institutions. Once these parties assume political responsibility, these tasks become even more important. After the devastating consequences of military conflict and social upheaval, leaders who suddenly find themselves in power must provide their followers with tangible signs that the self-imposed hardships of a revolutionary movement have been worth bearing. In these cases, they require the means to bring their broken economies back to good health and to restore an atmosphere of calm and stability.

In drawing this distinction between the idea of the revolutionary party and the organizational party, I do not mean to suggest that these two conceptions are destined to collide. Just as in any political movement, political leaders everywhere—although not always, as we shall see in the case of some revolutionaries—seek to minimize the degree to which their choices between the ideas and the practical demands of governance become mutually exclusive. In the communist world, a political order based solely on the idea of constantly revolutionizing society would explode; one based solely on organization would fail to inspire its followers and grind to a halt. Nonetheless, we can speak about competing tendencies on a spectrum of difficult choices. Historically, some rulers took their party’s revolutionary ideals more deeply to heart.
in making their decisions, while others favored the stability and predictability afforded by clear rules and identifiable routines.

If communist parties were structured like those of their liberal-democratic adversaries, these choices would not be particularly consequential. When liberal-democratic institutions work effectively, strong legislatures, independent judiciaries, and regular elections impose meaningful constraints on the exercise of power. But in the case of communist parties, the difference is decisive. The primacy that these party regimes assign to centralized decision making and their insistence upon the disciplined observance of their commands leaves them open to corrosive tendencies that undermine their virtuous pretensions. Unlike parliamentary regimes, the absolute authority of single-party rule seriously limits the extent of personal accountability in the upper echelons of power. Under these circumstances, the party is vulnerable to being kidnapped by leaders who have the political savvy to build effective alliances and the charismatic vision to capture the imagination of a broad following. Indeed, it is a revealing indication of the party’s susceptibility to such manipulation that we frequently associate the policies of these regimes with the thoughts, words, and deeds of single persons—a Lenin, a Stalin, a Mao, or a Fidel Castro—and not with their political institutions. In these cases, the idea that decision making is a collective enterprise evaporates and, in its wake, the leader’s preferences take over.

One can only marvel at the ease with which dictators monopolized decision making. Stalin spoke the language of revolution, but he used repressive measures to guarantee that his rigid conception of the term drowned out all others. Manifesting his animosity toward opposing viewpoints, he listened from the corridors of the House of Unions as Soviet prosecutors induced his longtime Bolshevik comrades in arms to make preposterous confessions during the Moscow show trials. He often signed their death warrants. Mao casually made decisions from the comfort of his swimming pool that eviscerated his Central Committee and destroyed the lives of millions of people. Each figure was driven by the narcissistic belief that he alone was capable of solving the problems that confront humanity. The lack of institutional accountability provided them, as well as countless other despotic personalities, with the opportunity to steer the mechanisms of power to their use.
These factors also contributed to the all-around deformation of the idea of the virtuous vanguard. One cannot account for the greatest horrors in communist history—Stalin’s purges, Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and the unfathomable dimensions of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge’s campaigns in the 1970s to “purify” Cambodian society—without recognizing the self-seeking and opportunistic motivations of midlevel party officials and cadres, as well as the secret police organs. Down the road, although in a far less violent way, these corrosive tendencies were evident in times of stability. In the 1970s and 1980s, in contradiction to official pronouncements that “communists have no special rights except the right always to be in the forefront where difficulties are the greatest,” to quote CPSU chief Leonid Brezhnev in 1967, members frequently took advantage of their official positions to obtain benefits that were unavailable to ordinary citizens. They had access to higher-quality consumer products, better apartments, and international travel, even if this privilege was confined to visiting fraternal allies like Mongolia, Angola, and Cuba. Some went further. Exchanging virtue for vice, they built personal fiefdoms, conducted business on the black market, and provided friends and family members with lucrative employment. In the 1990s and 2000s, Chinese and Vietnamese communists took the exploitation of personal privilege to new heights, even while denouncing the practice publicly.

In retrospect, one can easily understand why this cynical behavior eventually led to the erosion of popular support for these regimes. Yet significantly, this disillusionment was slow to take noticeable form in most socialist countries. In fact, given the benefits of holding office, party elites tacitly and perhaps even subconsciously colluded to maintain their privileges. In a culture of insiders, only the rare, wayward member chose to question these practices, even behind closed doors. Hence, notwithstanding occasional public expressions of discontent by nonparty members, a majority of these regimes had the appearance of relative stability.
An Idea in Motion

Thus far, I have provided reasons for the communist party’s striking record of resilience and its members’ commitment to maintaining its leading role. I have argued that single-party rule was, from the beginning, a compelling political idea. Even before it took organizational form, it garnered the loyalty of hopeful revolutionaries because it seemed to provide the solution to a multitude of different challenges—national liberation, economic modernization, cultural transformation—that went beyond the conventional Marxist focus on the class struggle over control of the means of production. Once in power, these parties evolved into viable organizations that, for the most part, proved up to the task of satisfying their members’ political and personal desires. In some cases, such as during Stalin’s socialist revolution from above, communist parties played crucial roles in transforming backward economies into industrial behemoths—albeit at the cost of unfathomable suffering. When these achievements lost their allure in the later stages of communist rule, they offered their supporters the less-than-virtuous comforts that come from sticking with the status quo.

If one were to stop at this point, as many scholars have done, one could easily leave the impression that the communist party’s long life was based upon a coherent set of beliefs that gave it broad appeal in one era and then fizzled out when it could no longer satisfy its followers. The shortcoming of this image, as I shall contend throughout this book, is that it does not capture the multiplicity of forms that the party assumed. Over long periods and across diverse regions, the definition of the party’s leading role meant different things to different people. At some points, its leaders’ interpretations of their responsibilities led to the elaboration of distinctive paths that determined their government’s policies for decades. At others, the party’s role as a meaningful revolutionary institution was minimal or, as it became after Stalin went to war with his longtime Bolshevik comrades in battle in the 1930s, simply nonexistent.

In contrast, other scholars have sought to account for the party’s longevity by depicting it as an organization that provided its leaders with the flexibility to reflect upon their options and adapt to changing times and circumstances. According to this perspective, party leaders were
continually looking for ways to maximize their organization’s attractiveness in diverse settings. Thus, parties that aspired to build followings in advanced industrial economies tailored their messages differently than those that sought to curry the favor of large peasant populations. Because working-class audiences were routinely exposed to the appeals of left-wing parties, such as moderate social democrats, communist agitators pragmatically set aside their prophecies of an imminent revolution and advanced policies that allowed for temporary accommodations with their competitors. In contrast, communist guerrilla fighters took different approaches because their survival depended on gaining the confidence of village communities. Rather than advancing policies that were geared to mobilizing urban workers or skilled professionals, they embraced broad populist appeals to win the hearts and minds of their audiences.

There is undeniable truth to both of these approaches. Without some common convictions, it is hard to imagine how the communist party would have spread to so many different parts of the world. Likewise, those parties that were unwilling to adapt to their circumstances quickly lost popular support. What these approaches lack, in my view, is an adequate way of accounting for change. The party’s long history cannot be accurately described as a simple story of life and death. Nor did it represent a straightforward attempt to discern the right strategies from one stage of development to the next. Rather, in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, its story is a record of fits and starts, successes and failures, and steps that were neither forward nor backward. These developments cannot be reduced to a historical teleology. In this book, I shall argue that one can only make sense of the communist party’s different forms by recognizing the decisive impact of the personalities who dominated it. These individuals’ victory over other contenders for power and the prevalence of highly centralized institutions endowed them with the means to decide which aspects of the party’s complex identity would be dominant. Additionally, they could determine the strategies that would be employed in pursuing its objectives. In short, they became the masters of the party idea.16

When we consider the party’s long-term prospects, these dictators’ overwhelming power had both advantageous and detrimental consequences for the character of the communist movement. On the positive
side, as we shall see, Lenin’s skillful portrayal of the Bolsheviks as a party that could serve the interests of multiple segments of the Russian population was an abiding contribution to the vitality of the international communist movement. Similarly, Mao’s mastery of the idiom of peasant rebellion made foreign concepts intelligible and attractive to party members who might otherwise have been unresponsive to them.

On the negative side, the concentration of power in the hands of a single person or persons had recurrent tragic consequences. One of the most prominent features of communist rule in the twentieth century was the stubborn resistance of dictators like Stalin and Mao to modifying their policies in the face of perilous circumstances. Stalin obliterated his army’s general command despite repeated indications of Germany’s intention to go to war with the USSR. More broadly, his systematic assault on the old Bolshevik elite deprived the country of its single most credible source of legitimation, save for his own personality cult. As a consequence, when Stalin died he left his successors with the formidable challenge of rebuilding a viable party institution to defend their authority. Likewise, Mao’s desire for total power and his refusal to heed the warnings of his advisers led him to champion the disastrous idea of a never-ending revolution during the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. When his deputies sought to promote more responsible policies in the wake of this debacle, Mao renewed his romantic focus on the party’s purposes as a pretext to destroy it as a functioning organization. In the case of both despots, there was little those around them could have done to prevent these catastrophes from taking place.

Perhaps one can find a grain of solace in one aspect of the communist party’s hypercentralized structure. One can imagine scenarios in which other figures could have risen to power. For every Stalin or Mao, there were equally influential personalities who were capable of offering alternate conceptions of party rule. As I shall suggest, it is conceivable that communists like Nikolai Bukharin in the Soviet Union and Liu Shaoqi in China would have instituted more benign forms of dictatorship if they had won the internal power struggles. Yet even if they had managed to get this far, their positions at the apex of decision making would have had the same, familiar drawback. They, too, had risen in a culture of revolutionary violence. Although one might hope otherwise, they could still have made the wrong choices.
Chapter 1

The impact of personal despotism presents a nagging question about the party’s longevity. Once power is monopolized by a single individual, how is it possible for the organization to adopt new policies when it needs to? One possibility is that a window of opportunity opens when a dictator either dies or is removed from office. In these instances, the record of reform is mixed at best. Whatever a new leader might profess in public, there is no guarantee that he will be any more responsible than his predecessors. As Soviet citizens found after Stalin’s death, old dictatorial habits die hard. Although Stalin’s successors mercifully broke free from the spiral of terror, Nikita Khrushchev’s years in office demonstrated the abiding tendency to vacillate between adherence to stable routines and a return to the demagogic practices of old. In the same way, a dictator’s removal from office is an equally unpredictable source of change. Until the 1980s, due to the concentration of power in these regimes, very few leaders lost their positions as a result of internal party struggles. In the exceptional cases when they were replaced, it was almost always the result of the intervention of a single external force—the Soviet Union. However, in these cases as well, new rulers did not necessarily mean new policies. These power holders not only had to want change, they also needed the wherewithal to build coalitions and, if they were fortunate, the support of an outside power, again the Soviet Union.

Ironically, many of the most profound changes in the understanding of communist party rule have come from circumstances in which the institution’s role has been tangential. I have already described one of them. This is the “good luck” that comes from events that have been generated by political instability or the devastation of war. It is impossible to understand the longevity of the Bolshevik regime, virtually all of the Eastern European regimes that came into being after World War II, and the victory of the Chinese communists without taking into account the multiple tragedies that enabled them to force their way into power. In many cases, such as Castro’s Cuba, one cannot account for these regimes’ staying power without considering the impact of an external threat.

A final impetus to significant change comes from the “bad luck” of unintended consequences, when these leaders attempt to serve their
interests by doing one thing and inadvertently create conditions that 
erode the chances of achieving their goals. An appreciation of this 
paradox is crucial for understanding the fortunes of dictatorships ev-
erywhere. If new policies can only come from those persons who mo-
nopolize power and these rulers will only take steps that they perceive 
to enhance their authority, it follows that major changes must derive 
from their misperceptions and mistakes. There is no better example of 
this unforgiving logic than the outcome of Mikhail Gorbachev’s at-
tempt to reform his party. It was no accident that Gorbachev’s defense 
of the CPSU’s leading role before the Congress of People’s Deputies in 
spring 1990 was futile. He found himself in this position because he 
had idealistically attempted over the preceding five years to revitalize the 
reputation of a flagging institution. He never intended to raise doubts 
about the party’s ruling authority. Quite the contrary, he was bent on 
restoring it. Yet, once he opened the legitimacy of the organ’s vanguard 
functions to debate, he set forces in motion that culminated in the 
CPSU’s loss of all credible reasons for existing. As a result, the entire 
edifice of communist rule came crashing down.

The Life and Death of the Party

This book is a postmortem on the long life and unexpected demise 
of a global institution. Looking back, there are manifold benefits to 
knowing how the life story of the communist party came out. We can 
ask pointed questions about the strengths and weaknesses of contending 
strategies and make informed judgments about leaders’ choices in 
pursuing their ideals. Yet, we must steer clear of the trap of thinking 
deterministically about the party’s history. The meanderings of the idea 
of the party’s vanguard role over countries as diverse as England, Ger-
many, the Soviet Union, China, and Yugoslavia were not predestined. 
After all, the people who were moved by this concept were living their 
lives forward. They were making choices about which types of political 
action had the best chance of realizing their dreams. They were acting 
on the basis of limited information under uncertain conditions. Despite 
their membership in a purportedly comradely association and their 
participation in an international movement, these figures were frequently
Caught up in internecine battles over both the minutiae of party doctrine and the role of violence in pursuit of their revolutionary mission. They also had stubborn convictions. Some of their decisions redounded to the party’s benefit. Others severely impaired its capacity to function. Even in the worst times, however, both the ideas behind the party and the organization itself proved to be surprisingly resilient, that is, at least until those fateful days in 1989 and 1990 when these leaders’ last sources of support vanished.

I shall begin this exploration of an institution that ruled significant segments of the globe with the common source of the communist movement, the prophecies of Karl Marx. As we shall see, when this nineteenth-century rebel contemplated the condition of the working class at the height of the Industrial Revolution, his idea of an inevitable revolution into socialism and communism made the adoption of the model of rudimentary party organization of his era seem unnecessary. As a result, he left the design of his party to later revolutionaries. Over the following decades, this bequest proved to be a priceless opportunity for revolutionaries who came to power by their own devices, people like Lenin, Mao, and Castro. As I shall show, the original idea of the party gave them tremendous flexibility in adapting Marx’s view of history to specific conditions in their own countries. Additionally, I shall demonstrate that other revolutionaries were not as lucky. Since a majority of the world’s communist parties assumed power under the sway of the Soviet Union, they were forced to adopt conceptions of their mission that had little to do with the challenges they faced on their own soil.

Once I have set the stage for the communist party’s rule, I will show how the party idea degenerated into a tool for personal despotism. As I have already indicated, I do not mean to suggest that all cults of personality are alike. For example, I disagree with scholars who equate Stalin’s and Mao’s objectives. Although the two despots were responsible for massive atrocities, they had fundamentally different ideas about the institution’s proper functions. Nor will I contend that the descent into tyranny on such an unfathomable scale was preordained. Once these personality cults were in place, however, the return to an understanding of party rule that was not based on a single individual’s whim presented its advocates with a formidable obstacle. As I shall
argue, they met the challenge to a greater, if far from inspiring, extent than many scholars have contended. By the 1970s, the Soviet regime and most of its Eastern European allies adopted a less exacting form of party dictatorship that gave them hope that they could renew their followers’ faith in their decisions. In the 1980s, China’s leaders pursued an even more aggressive legitimation strategy. Nonetheless, wherever one went in the communist world, the prospects for a reinvigorated conception of party leadership waned. The specific idea of an enlightened vanguard did not last beyond the twentieth century, even in purportedly outlying cases like China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. With a whimper and not a violent act of defiance, the communist party succumbed to its long-festering contradictions when its supporters lost both the will to fight for it and the conviction that it represented a morally defensible vehicle for securing the common good.