



Communism: A History (Modern Library Chronicles)

By Richard Pipes

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With astonishing authority and clarity, Richard Pipes has fused a lifetime's scholarship into a single focused history of Communism, from its hopeful birth as a theory to its miserable death as a practice. At its heart, the book is a history of the Soviet Union, the most comprehensive reorganization of human society ever attempted by a nation-state. This is the story of how the agitation of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, two mid-nineteenth-century European thinkers and writers, led to a great and terrible world religion that brought down a mighty empire, consumed the world in conflict, and left in its wake a devastation whose full costs can only now be tabulated.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

As Harvard University professor Richard Pipes shows in *Communism: A Brief History*, the tragedy of Communism is that its history was anything but brief. For most of the 20th century, it held much of the globe in its fatal grip: The utopian ideology is responsible for nearly 100 million deaths, which is 50 percent more than the number of people killed in the two world wars combined. "Communism was not a good idea that went wrong; it was a bad idea," writes Pipes, who is also the author of *The Russian Revolution* and *Property and Freedom*.

This compelling little book is a devastating critique of Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, and everything else that fits under the awful rubric of Communism. It begins by tracing Communism's philosophical origins (it has antecedents in Plato) and then outlines the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Next comes the story of why Communism took root in Russia and not the industrial West, where Marx himself believed it would sprout (answer: the traditions of property rights and the rule of law were too strong). Even in Russia, Communism was not the product of popular demand (in fact, it has never been the product of popular demand anywhere). Instead, it was a top-down revolution imposed on the whole country by a small minority of elites, led by Lenin. The Communists claimed to represent workers, but few workers were actually a part of their movement. Thus, "the Communists had to rule despotically and violently; they could never afford to relax their authority." And they were capable of incredible cruelty: "The so-called purges of the 1930s were a terror campaign that in indiscriminate ferocity and number of victims had no parallel in world history." In 1937 and 1938, for instance, the Soviet rulers of Russia executed an average of 1,000 people per day; the tsarist regime they supplanted, which was often criticized as inhumane, executed less than 4,000 people for political crimes over an 85-year period.

Though Pipes appropriately spends much time discussing the Soviet Union, he also examines Communism's reception in the West and in developing countries. The book is a concise tour de force. As the cold war fades into history, it is critical not to forget the monstrous legacy of Communism, whose horrible record Pipes lays out on these pages. This is a magnificent book, a wonderful primer on a topic whose importance is difficult to overstate. --*John Miller*

From Publishers Weekly

This opinionated introduction to communism would be better subtitled "requiem for a misguided ideology." Pipes (*The Russian Revolution*) focuses much of the book on his own field of specialty the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. The Harvard historian is at his best here, providing a thorough account of the ascendancy of the Russian party in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in accessible and at times eloquent prose: "Soviet totalitarianism thus grew out of Marxist seeds planted on the soil of tsarist patrimonialism." Part of the Modern Library's series on world history, the book details Soviet atrocities, emphasizing how Communist agricultural policies not only suppressed human rights but led to famines that killed millions of Soviet citizens. The sections on communism in other countries are much shorter and not as strong, particularly the discussion of Chile, in which Pipes fails to address the involvement of the United States in the 1973 coup that overthrew Socialist leader Salvador Allende. Throughout this volume, Pipes, a longtime Cold Warrior who served as Reagan's National Security Council adviser on Soviet and East European affairs, is on a mission to prove that communism's egalitarian impulses run contrary to human nature. Whether or not they agree with Pipes's views, students and general readers alike will benefit from this concise, insightful work. (Sept.) Forecast: The book is certain to be widely taught in its field and will be promoted in a brochure

mailing to historians but a three-city author tour and series advertising in the New York Times Book Review, the Chronicle of Higher Education and Lingua Franca should help the book find a more general though learned readership as well.

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From Library Journal

Pipes brings to this short study unsurpassed credentials as a historian of 19th- and 20th-century Russia. His *Russia Under the Old Regime* (LJ 3/15/75. o.p.) offered, at much greater length than here, his views on the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing course of Soviet history. For him it is a tale of unremitting failure and tragedy, even more apocalyptic than that told in Martin Malia's *The Soviet Tragedy* (1994). Here he sketches out a background to the idea of communism, then outlines its application in Russia by Lenin, Stalin, and their heirs and its reception in the West and the Third World. Pipes is relentless. Communist leaders are ruthless or psychotic killers (in Pol Pot's case, fair enough), starry-eyed idealists, or corrupt and cynical party hacks. Castro is little better than a pimp for Cuban women. A final section, "Looking Back," emphasizes the human and psychological cost to Russia and the world of this illusion. As a brief, polemical diatribe by one of its fiercest Western critics and historians, this short account of communism should provoke and instruct. For general and academic libraries. Robert Johnston, McMaster Univ., Hamilton, Ont.

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Users Review

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