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“*Red Flags* is a much-needed reckoning with a fraught history. Camfield insists on assessing states that practised ‘Actually Existing Socialism’ not just from what advocates and detractors have said about them but by adopting a radical critique of authoritarian politics to understand the societies that lived under AES. The conflation of communism — a radically pro-democracy worldview — with AES continues to limit the anti-capitalist imagination today, as many self-declared leftists take it upon themselves to ‘defend’ AES societies from attacks from the right instead of critiquing authoritarian ‘left’ politics and moving beyond them once and for all.”

—**ELIA AYOUB**, co-founder of *From The Periphery* and founder of
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“Thank goodness someone had the clarity of mind to write this book. We are especially lucky that it was David Camfield, who combines his knowledge of world history with a fiery, unwavering commitment to working-class democracy. He is fair to proponents of ‘Actually Existing Socialism’ without blunting his argument that their politics have disastrously distorted the meaning of communism. This short, readable book answers urgent questions on the path to human emancipation.”

—**SAIMA DESAI**, former editor of *Briarpatch Magazine*

“I grew up under a Stalinist regime in the West Bengal of the 1970s and ’80s. I witnessed the courting of big business and the eviction of people from their land by the regime in the name of ‘development.’ We were encouraged to read Marx, but never encouraged to apply Marx to our reality. This dissonance between theory and practice also marked my observation of the regimes of the USSR and Eastern Europe. While capitalist states did not always justify their repression, so-called socialist states justified present repression in the name of a bright communist future. I found it difficult to hold on to a theory, Marxism, that could so easily accommodate repression. I only wish I had read *Red Flags* in my teens; it would have assured me not only of the emancipatory potential of Marxism but also its incompatibility with both capitalist state and market.”

—TITHI BHATTACHARYA, associate professor, Purdue University
and editor of *Social Reproduction Theory*

“*Red Flags* explains the attraction and influence of the ideas of the rulers of the former Eastern bloc and China, and why they are inadequate in the struggle for human liberation.”

—IAN ALLINSON, author of *Workers Can Win: A Guide to Organising At Work*

RED FLAGS

A RECKONING WITH COMMUNISM
FOR THE FUTURE OF THE LEFT

DAVID CAMFIELD



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“Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.”

— William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball* (1886)

EXCERPT

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND FORMAT

In this book I use “communism” (with a lower-case *c*) to refer to a classless and stateless society of freedom in which people democratically organize production to meet their needs and flourish. I also use it to name politics whose ultimate goal is the creation of such a society.

I occasionally use “Communist,” capitalized, to refer to societies ruled by parties that were officially committed to Marxism-Leninism. These parties often used “Communist” in their names. I usually refer to these societies in a generic way as so-called “actually existing socialist,” abbreviated simply as AES. AES was originally a term used in many Marxist-Leninist states to officially characterize these societies. I use AES in a strictly neutral sense, without endorsing the implication that these societies were moving towards communism. Sometimes I use “Communist,” capitalized, to refer to politics that seek to create societies structured along the lines first developed in the USSR from 1928 on. The relationship between Communism and communism is central to what this book is about.

Within quotations, letters, and words within square brackets are my own insertions or changes. All use of italics for emphasis within quotations is from the original.

SOME ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AES	“Actually Existing Socialism”
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Comintern	Communist International
CP	Communist Party
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
ML	Marxist-Leninist
NCM	New Communist Movement
NKVD	People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (internal security and secret police force in the USSR)
PRC	People’s Republic of China
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

THINKING ABOUT “ACTUALLY EXISTING SOCIALISM” IN A WORLD ON FIRE

CAPITALISM HAS AN IMAGE PROBLEM. In a 2022 poll, younger people in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom were less likely to endorse capitalism as an ideal economic system than people over thirty-four. The results worried the authors who reported on the polling for their very right-wing funder, the Fraser Institute; “tepid” is the word they chose to describe support for capitalism among people aged eighteen to thirty-four. Worse from their perspective was that “all four countries recorded at least 4 out of 10 respondents between 18 and 34 years of age indicating agreement or strong agreement that socialism is the ideal economic system for their country.”¹ Similarly, in the US a large 2022 survey reported that 57 percent of people had a positive view of capitalism, down from 65 percent in 2019. Among people aged eighteen to twenty-nine, only 40 percent said they saw capitalism in that light.²

We should not put too much weight on surveys, but these and similar opinion polls register a growing popular understanding that the way society is organized today has many serious problems. Steadily rising rents and house prices; homelessness; the growing cost of food and other necessities; insecure employment; wages whose buying power is shrinking due to inflation; the loss or deteriorating quality of public services — all are making life harder for many people in even the richest countries. The effects of climate change are often palpable: spells of extremely hot weather, smoke from forest fires that drifts great distances and makes breathing difficult, droughts, floods, storms, and more. Yet in spite of what’s happening and all the talk about climate change, little is actually being done in most places to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that governments claim to be committed to be lowering. The same goes for action to address other aspects of the global ecological crisis, such as

the loss of biodiversity (species extinction) and access to safe water and air.³ Right-wing political forces, including fascist and other far-right tendencies, are gaining ground internationally.⁴ The US and its allies are enabling Israel's genocidal violence in Palestine.⁵ Growing tensions between the rulers of the countries of the US-led "West" and those of China and Russia raise fears of war. The term "polycrisis" has emerged as a way of naming the entangled and mutually reinforcing nature of today's crises.⁶ These conditions corrode hope for a better future. Is it any wonder that more people are experiencing so much mental distress? Is it any surprise that enthusiasm for capitalism is fading?

ANTI-COMMUNISM

Many of capitalism's champions no longer project the confident optimism that they displayed between the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR at the end of the 1980s and the Great Recession of 2007–09. Yet defenders of the current social order can still marshal an array of arguments to support the idea that, whatever its flaws, there is no alternative to it (other than perhaps the collapse of civilization). One way they defend capitalism is with anti-communism. Under this banner the US state and its allies and proxies went to great lengths during the second half of the last century to "eliminate leftists or accused leftists" in the Global South. The number of people they killed in campaigns of "intentional mass murder" numbered over one million. This figure "does not include deaths from regular war, collateral damage from military engagements, or unintentional deaths (starvation, disease) caused by anticommunist governments."⁷ Under the banner of anti-communism, the US and other Western states also used repressive measures against leftists within their countries.⁸ Anti-communism is the ideology expressed in a US congressional resolution passed in 2023 proclaiming that "Congress denounces socialism in all its forms, and opposes the implementation of socialist policies in the United States of America." This denunciation is backed by dubious assertions, including:

socialist ideology necessitates a concentration of power that has time and time again collapsed into Communist regimes, totalitarian rule, and brutal dictatorships ... socialism has repeatedly led to famine and mass murders, and the killing of over

100,000,000 people worldwide ... many of the greatest crimes in history were committed by socialist ideologues, including Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un, Daniel Ortega, Hugo Chavez, and Nicolás Maduro.⁹

While the resolution left socialism undefined, it is clearly a licence to stigmatize even social reforms (I use the term reform to refer to changes within a social order, whether minor or major) like public health care, price controls, and public housing. The implication is that these are steps towards Communist tyranny because they “interfere” with markets. Even though China today is very different from China under Mao, anti-communism can also be harnessed to motivate support for the US, Canadian, and Australian governments in their increasingly aggressive rivalry with the state led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The Black Book of Communism, originally published in French at the close of the twentieth century, is the closest thing to a bible for contemporary anti-communists.¹⁰ This is the source of the unreliable figure of one hundred million dead found in the US congressional resolution. The book’s central idea is that communism in all its forms shares an evil criminal essence that makes it the most murderous force in human history. There is supposedly a straight line from the Russian Revolution to mass murder under Joseph Stalin when he headed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Contexts and social forces are irrelevant; what matters is communism’s lethal ideas. Communism is deemed “criminal as both ideology and reality, and always identical in all times and in all places,” as historian Enzo Traverso puts it in his critique of anti-communism after the collapse of the USSR and the other “actually existing socialist” societies of Eastern Europe. The interpretation found in *The Black Book of Communism* and similar sources is not in the least original: it recycles “the old McCarthyist theory of the communist conspiracy”¹¹ from the US in the 1950s. This is a way of understanding history with an unambiguous message for the present. Historian Douglas Greene sums this up nicely: communism is a “messianic and totalitarian democratic pseudo-religion” that wrongly “promises an earthly happiness.” But trying to “create a paradise on earth” can only lead to extraordinary horrors. This “damns in advance any attempt to change the world.”¹²

Anti-communism often lumps communism and fascism together as “totalitarianism.” This kind of demonization of communism is

reflected in the marking of August 23 as Black Ribbon Day and the idea that Communism and Nazism inflicted a “double genocide” on the nations of Eastern Europe. It has gone furthest in the several countries in Eastern Europe where it has been embedded in laws that prohibit the public display of communist symbols or the promotion of communist ideas. In the region, right-wing nationalists have succeeded in making communism

the symbol of the evil of history and the ultimate perpetrator, commemorated and condemned alongside Nazism. The nation, characterised as the heroic protagonist in the narrative of historical struggles of the mythic forces of West and East, is now constructed as an East European community of victims, repressed by both totalitarian regimes, but mainly by communism.¹³

This kind of anti-communism devotes far more attention to people in Eastern Europe killed by Communists than to the many more people murdered by the Nazis. For example, in Budapest the House of Terror Museum has one room on the Holocaust and around twenty on Communism. Yet the 1941–45 war between the USSR and Nazi Germany began as the USSR’s self-defence against a German invasion that was “a colonial war with no distinction between combatants and civilians, in which whole peoples were to be made into slaves, while others were exterminated,” as Traverso notes.¹⁴ The USSR did end up occupying Eastern Europe, its armies did commit atrocities, and the Communist states it established in Eastern Europe were repressive. But all this was fundamentally different from what the Nazis did.¹⁵ Eastern European anti-communists also generally downplay how many people in their countries collaborated with Nazism.¹⁶ Seeing communism as “history’s worst evil,” this kind of anti-communism opens the door to treating Nazism as preferable.¹⁷ Even when anti-communists do not go so far as to apologize for fascism, institutionalizing anti-communism creates a hostile ideological environment for anyone who wants to encourage collective action to improve the lives of working-class and oppressed people. Their efforts can be smeared as alien agitation, hostile to the national community. This is not just a problem in countries with well-known anti-communist legislation, such as Poland and Indonesia; there are anti-communist laws still on the books today in parts of the US. Such laws are tools that right-wing politicians can use against anyone

they label “communist.”¹⁸ Today, for people on the far right like Donald Trump who believe in the threat of a mythical “cultural Marxism,” even liberal supporters of equal rights for queer and trans people can be so labelled.¹⁹ Little wonder, then, that more people are pushing back against anti-communism.

QUESTIONING ANTI-COMMUNISM

Anti-communism is an asset for capitalism’s defenders. But it has not stopped the experience of living under capitalism from making growing numbers of people around the world, especially young people, increasingly critical of capitalism as a way of organizing society. Sometimes, and more often than was the case in the 1990s and at least the first decade of this century, anti-capitalist sentiment is also “anti-anti-communist.” This involves both rejecting anti-communism and adopting an attitude that is at least somewhat sympathetic to the USSR and similar societies. It should not be difficult to understand why many people critical of capitalism think this way. After all, the capitalist status quo with which we are all too familiar is horrible. Its defenders demonize communism. Thus, sympathy for whatever capitalism’s champions denounce can come easily, especially for people unfamiliar with the societies that anti-communists portray as evil.

Here I must pause to address the question of what to call societies organized along the lines first developed in the USSR (these societies are distinct from countries governed by parties that claim to be socialist in which private firms continue to control most economic activity, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua²⁰). There is no term for them that is universally accepted. Anti-communists often call them “Communist” (as have a few anti-capitalist radicals critical of them). However, this term has generally been rejected by their governments and supporters, who have maintained that these societies were not yet communist but only moving in the direction of communism as they understood it. They described this social order as “socialist,” often using the term “actually existing socialism” for it. Many communists who are critical of these societies call them “Stalinist.” Some anti-communists have used the same term. For now, this book will refer to them as so-called “actually existing socialism,” abbreviated as AES. Here this is simply a generic neutral term for these societies, *used without accepting the claim that these societies were evolving towards communism or any other*

claim about them. What they were and whether they were in transition to communism are crucial questions that this book addresses. How communism and transition to it should be understood will be explained in the third section of this chapter.

Importantly, anti-anti-communism is distinctly different from a perspective that opposes *both* capitalism and AES as ways of organizing society rooted in domination. It is the latter response that is expressed by a phrase from the radical left in the 1960s: “The ‘Communist’ world is not communist and the ‘Free’ world’ is not free.”²¹ But where Trump and his liberal opponents put a minus sign, today’s anti-anti-communists tend to put a plus. When the subject is Communism, anti-anti-communists generally combine sympathy with at least some criticism of the perceived shortcomings of Communist societies and movements. But sometimes contemporary anti-anti-communism flows into outright endorsement of some version of Communism, whether that of Stalin or Mao in the past or China and Cuba today.

Anti-anti-communism is not a new phenomenon. It was a feature of the culture of part of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. “We refuse to be anti-communist,” declared Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd, central organizers in the mid-1960s of the emerging movement against the US war in Vietnam.²² Many people in North America and Western Europe who took part in the movements of that time started by adopting an anti-anti-communist stance and went on to become involved with what was often called the New Communist Movement (NCM), a sizeable current of the radical left that looked above all to China for inspiration.²³

Today, long after the disintegration of the NCM and the end of the Cold War between the US-led “Free World” and the “Communist” states, anti-anti-communism has a somewhat different flavour, one that more often acknowledges problems in AES societies. Ethnographer Kristin Ghodsee and philosopher Scott Sehon present the situation this way:

On the Left stand those with some sympathy for socialist ideals and the popular opinion of hundreds of millions of Russian and east European citizens nostalgic for their state socialist pasts. On the Right stand the committed anti-totalitarians, both east and west, insisting that all experiments with Marxism will always and inevitably end with the gulag. Where one side sees shades of grey, the other views the world in black and white.²⁴

In other words, Ghodsee and Sehon see anti-anti-communism (their source for which is anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who rejected anti-communism in the Cold War US) as the alternative to a right-wing position. They do not acknowledge a third possibility: refusing both anti-communism and nostalgia for AES and being deeply critical of both capitalism and AES from a left-wing perspective that yearns for a better world. They are explicit about their criticisms of Communism: “this does not mean that we are apologising for, or excusing the atrocities or the lost lives of millions of men and women who suffered for their political beliefs.”²⁵ After dissecting today’s anti-communism, they conclude:

Responsible and rational citizens need to be critical of simplistic historical narratives that rely on the pitchfork effect to demonise anyone on the Left. We should all embrace Geertz’s idea of an anti-anti-communism in hopes that critical engagement with the lessons of the 20th century might help us to find a new path that navigates between, or rises above, the many crimes of both communism and capitalism.

In her 2018 book *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism*, which has been translated into over a dozen languages, Ghodsee argues that although “state socialism” ultimately failed, for much of the twentieth century it “presented an existential challenge to the worst excesses of the free market.”²⁶ Its collapse led to the end of efforts to regulate markets and redistribute incomes. Moreover, these socialist experiments had many positive aspects. The state guaranteed citizens employment and housing. It provided public child care and implemented other measures to promote women’s education and participation in paid work, including in jobs that had traditionally not been done by women. “There was a baby in all that bathwater. It’s time we got around to saving it,” Ghodsee concludes.²⁷ While those public services and rights undoubtedly existed, this way of evaluating them — “cherry pick[ing] from the Soviet policy pantheon,” as theorist Sophie Lewis puts it²⁸ — treats them as if they can be considered apart from the oppressive features of AES with which they were entangled. This approach is similar to the one taken by people who argue that we should not be anti-capitalist because Western capitalist societies have positive aspects like civil liberties, multi-party elections, and unions through which workers can defend themselves

against employers and fight to improve their pay and working conditions. As Lewis observes, Ghodsee never asks “the question of what an anti-capitalist, non-capitalist, post-capitalist society worthy of those names might actually look like.”²⁹ A somewhat similar approach can be seen in *Free*, political theorist Lea Ypi’s acclaimed memoir of life before and after the collapse of AES in Albania, which has been translated into over twenty languages. Ypi is unsparing about the failings of the society in which she grew up — and about how capitalism limits human freedom. At the same time, she sees Albania as having been a socialist society, emphatically rejecting the opinions of socialists who question that assumption.³⁰

In recent years anti-anti-communism has become more common on the left than it was for several decades after the collapse of AES. Often this is a diffuse mood that surfaces in social industry posts.³¹ But it also crops up in articles in widely read left-wing publications. For example, in 2022 journalist Liza Featherstone looked to the history of the East Bloc to criticize the US’s failure to guarantee workers any paid vacation time. In an article on the *Jacobin* website, possibly the most-read English-language radical publication, Featherstone argued that Communism:

took summer vacation seriously. Long before any other industrialized nations, the Soviet Union’s Labour Code obligated employers to provide two weeks of paid vacation. The 1936 Soviet constitution specifically included a “right to rest.” To that end, the Eastern Bloc communist countries not only provided the time off but invested in affordable vacation spots for workers. In the late 1930s, the government increased spending on resorts, health camps, campgrounds, and other vacation spots, including spas. Some of these offered activities, such as volleyball or mushroom hunting.³²

Another article on the same site, about Bulgarian architecture, concludes that “socialist architecture’s presence across the post-communist world reminds people that another world — however flawed — was once possible.”³³ This kind of nostalgic response captures the spirit in which today’s anti-anti-communism engages with AES. Similarly, in British socialist magazine *Tribune*’s interview with Sheila Fitzpatrick, “What Was the Soviet Union?,” the historian describes “what happened to the promise of the revolution” as upward mobility for workers, “‘affirmative action’

on behalf of workers, but also on behalf of minorities, small nationalities, women, and so on,” “not ... straightforward betrayal ... of the working class.”³⁴ Writing in the socialist journal *Catalyst*, Ghodsee and Julia Mead argue that “state-socialist governments supported women’s rights in ways that dramatically improved the material conditions of hundreds of millions of women’s lives” in spite of “very real downsides” like “authoritarian regimes.”³⁵ The anti-anti-communist stance is quite different from one that is ruthlessly critical of social domination and assesses both capitalism and AES from that perspective — the approach once expressed in the previously mentioned slogan “The ‘Communist’ world is not communist and the ‘Free’ world’ is not free.”

The soil of anti-anti-communism today is fertile ground for perspectives that are not just sympathetic to AES but enthusiastic about it. Writer Barnaby Raine observes that

there is a new if modest proliferation of radicals now who would have baffled 1990s commentators; young people in Europe and North America who want to sound like the old Communists. On podcasts and on social media, in political parties and in unions, they salute authoritarian state power past and present. They speak, they say, in the name of socialism. They amass thousands of followers online. They are not the dwindling band of pensioners who remember subsidised cruises on the Volga. They don an aesthetic of kitsch cheek or unsentimental realism or, somehow, both.³⁶

Critics on the left have dubbed them “tankies” (a term some anti-communists now also use indiscriminately to smear anyone who opposes Western imperialism) and “campists.” Such a positive evaluation of AES is not restricted to some young radicals, though. We can see it, for instance, in an editorial against anti-communism by Salvatore Engel-De Mauro, at the time chief editor of the ecosocialist academic journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. This statement deplores the “blanket rejection of state socialism by many leftists” and praises the “historical achievements” of those societies as a basis “on which better socialist futures can be built, using critical understanding and historical insight to help pre-empt institutional degeneration, political repression, and general social harm.”³⁷ Instead of demonstrating that AES societies were, in spite of their problems, qualitatively better than capitalism and not

equally deserving of rejection, such an approach simply assumes that this is true. Political theorist Jodi Dean, one of the highest-profile writers in English associated with communist ideas today, writes in a similar vein.³⁸ In their *Half-Earth Socialism*, ecosocialists Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass insist that the lack of democracy in the USSR was a problem, since democracy was needed to make economic planning really work, but they do not question the country's socialist credentials. They also suggest that Cuba since the early 1990s is similar to the ecosocialism they advocate.³⁹

Why does any of this matter today? There is a great deal at stake in how we respond to anti-communism and what we make of AES. If anti-communists are right, attempts to replace capitalism are misguided. If AES was, and in its remaining holdouts still is, a better way of organizing society, then anti-capitalists should look to such societies and the Communist political tradition associated with AES for instruction and inspiration. If AES is not such an alternative, anti-capitalists will need to look elsewhere.

THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

What the AES societies were and are is a *very* different kind of question than, say, the question of what kind of society Spain was in 1492 when Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic and claimed the lands he “discovered” for the Spanish Crown. Virtually no one in the twenty-first century wants to recreate late feudalism. But there are people who believe it would be good to replace capitalism with something that resembles AES at least in some ways. Some of today's communists heap AES with praise, even celebrating Stalin; others are more critical.⁴⁰ There are also communists who maintain that AES was not moving towards communism. How should we make sense of all this?

This book analyzes AES societies and Communist politics from the perspective I call reconstructed historical materialism, an unorthodox anti-racist feminist marxism⁴¹ (I do not capitalize marxism to make the point that this is a living approach to understanding society in order to change it, one that was pioneered by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, brilliant imperfect thinkers in the nineteenth century, and has been developed by other people; it is not a system of thought given to us by revered Founding Fathers). This approach tries to develop what Marx and Engels called the “materialist conception of history” by bringing

together their best ideas, the best ideas of later marxists, and insights arising out of contemporary struggles against oppression.

In brief, this book’s perspective views human societies as produced by an animal species distinguished by how its members cooperate to transform the rest of nature in ways we consciously choose. In so doing, humans change ourselves and our culture. We have a metabolic relationship with the rest of nature, taking materials and energy from it as we remake our environments and change ourselves at the same time. This social metabolism changes depending on how the interconnected core features of human societies are organized. These are how people have babies, care for people of all ages, and produce goods and services. The social arrangements for carrying out these core activities vary and change across history and geography.

Since the appearance of gender oppression and class exploitation in history, societies have been made up of interwoven social relations such as class, gender, sexuality, and, much more recently, race. At the centre of every society is the labour done to carry out its core activities of having babies, providing care, and producing goods and services. A distinctive way of organizing people to produce is called a mode of production. A mode of production in which class division exists — feudalism and capitalism are two examples — is distinguished by the shape it gives to two overlapping phenomena. The first is productive forces: the technology, knowledge, and ways of cooperating that people use to produce goods and services. The other is relations of production. We can think of these as having two dimensions. There are “vertical” social relations between the people who actually produce goods and services, the direct producers (such as wage-workers), and the people (such as capitalist employers) who exploit their labour. There are also “horizontal” relations among members of both the exploiting and exploited classes. Exploitation involves the extraction of surplus labour from the direct producers. Surplus labour takes the form of work effort or products of labour beyond what goes into reproducing the direct producers. For example, exploiters can appropriate some of the goods that toilers produce, such as a share of what peasants grow. They can also extract sums of money, as when landlords make peasants pay rent for the land they farm. A third example, familiar to people who work for wages, is workers producing goods and services worth more than the compensation received for their labour.

To illustrate some of these ideas briefly, consider how the relationship between humans and the rest of nature was radically different in Indigenous societies in North America before European colonialism was imposed on them than it was in the societies built across the continent by the European settlers and their descendants who dispossessed Indigenous peoples. This is because most Indigenous societies were organized along the lines of modes of production we can call egalitarian-communal; there was no ruling class that enriched itself by systematically exploiting direct producers. In contrast, European colonialism at first bore the stamp of the feudal mode of production that still existed in Spain, England, and France. It then became structured by capitalism as that new mode of production became dominant in England. Feudal colonialism was mostly about plunder to enrich monarchs and nobles, exemplified by Spanish colonial authorities who used enslaved and otherwise coerced labour to extract silver and gold. British colonialism was different because Britain became capitalist. Capitalist competition is a distinguishing feature of this mode of production. Economic competition between capitalists is familiar. But there is also geopolitical competition between capitalist states. The competitive logic of capitalism drove British and US settler colonialism to relentlessly expand across the continent to acquire ever more land and resources, dispossessing Indigenous people all along the way. At first there were many settler farmers, fishers, and artisans who produced mostly for their own subsistence, along with traders. For a small number of colonists, the labour of a massive force of enslaved Africans generated great wealth. Over time, as capitalism transformed the US and the British colonies that became Canada, competing business owners producing goods to sell for profit, such as lumber, cotton, wheat, and tools, became increasingly important. Here we see another key feature of capitalism: most goods and services are commodities, produced for sale, not for the immediate use of the people who actually produce them. As part of the same process, a growing class of people came into existence who had no option but to sell their ability to work to employers in exchange for wages. This reflected another of capitalism's unique characteristics: human labour power becomes a commodity on a large scale. Capitalist competition forces employers to reorganize labour, raising productivity by making work more intense and introducing new technologies. This leads to the rapid growth of productive forces while harming direct producers and the rest of nature.⁴²

Today capitalism structures our world more widely and deeply than ever. It has overwhelmed all pre-capitalist modes of production. Nevertheless, the reconstructed historical materialism I use in this book considers it *possible* — which, to be clear, does not mean likely, much less inevitable — and desirable for people to break with capitalism and at least start a transition to a kind of society that has not yet existed in history: a classless and stateless society of freedom in which people organize production to meet their needs and flourish — communism. This would be a society founded on the highly democratic cooperative control of society's wealth by the entire community. Productive forces themselves would be remade along with the new relations of production. The way society is organized would transcend both markets and state power, which both "express modes of social alienation in which human beings are unable to regulate and govern their economic and political affairs democratically, and in which institutions and mechanisms outside their control dominate and direct their life activities."⁴³ Philosopher Søren Mau puts it well:

Communism doesn't imply a particular idea of the good life. Communism isn't a lifestyle or a fantasy about making every facet of an individual's life the object of political decision-making; it isn't a romantic community cult or a dream of communes and potlucks and DIY culture. Communism is the effort to establish institutions that can ensure the highest possible degree of individual freedom and democratic control over those aspects of human life that are, necessarily, shared by the members of a society. Communism is just as much for introverts and hermits as it is for enthusiastic collectivists ... The fundamental condition of communism is that the basic conditions of the life of society are brought under democratic control ... What is at stake here is thus a wide-ranging and comprehensive expansion of democracy.⁴⁴

That such social arrangements were possible and worth fighting for was the basic idea of a new current of revolutionary and democratic politics that first emerged on the left wing of the working-class movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Marx has been this current's greatest theorist.⁴⁵ The final chapter of this book takes up the possibility of a future transition towards such a society.

No longer bound by capital's ceaseless drive to accumulate on an ever-larger scale and at an ever-faster speed, without any limits, such a society could prioritize action to address the ecological crisis and begin to repair the devastation wrought by capitalism on the rest of nature (making this a priority would not be automatic — the decision would have to be made democratically). It would transform how people live and care for one another. How this would look cannot be predicted, though past experiences in moments of revolutionary upheaval and breakthrough may provide some glimpses. The goal would be all-round human emancipation, the end of class exploitation, alienation, and all forms of oppression including those based on gender, sexuality, race, and disability.⁴⁶ Transition towards this kind of society would not automatically lead to liberation from all kinds of oppression. However, it would mightily destabilize them and facilitate efforts by oppressed groups to uproot the different forms of domination to which they are subjected.⁴⁷

What we call such a society is *much* less important than clarity about what kind of society it would be. For Marx, as political economist Paresh Chattopadhyay argues, “socialism and communism are simply equivalent and alternative terms for the same society that he envisages for the post-capitalist epoch which he calls, in different texts, equivalently: communism, socialism, Republic of Labour, society of free and associated producers or simply Association, Cooperative Society, (re)union of free individuals.”⁴⁸ It later became common among many of Marx's would-be followers to think of “socialism” as a stage of development before the ultimate goal of “communism” is achieved. The idea was that under socialism the state and “certain inequalities in property still exist,” to quote Stalin, top leader of the CPSU in the 1930s when its leadership declared that the USSR had attained socialism.⁴⁹ This was how the terms *socialism* and *communism* were used in the AES societies. In the USSR, for example, under Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, the CPSU program predicted that communism would be achieved by the early 1980s, a claim that was dropped early in the 1970s.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, philosopher Peter Hudis is correct to write that “the later notion that ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ represent distinct stages of social development — a staple of Stalinist dogma — was alien to Marx's thought and only entered the lexicon of ‘Marxism’ after his death.”⁵¹ In this book, I will use *communism* to refer to the kind of society described in the previous two paragraphs, assuming that a society that had transcended

class divisions and state power would be evolving, not static. I will call a society in transition to communism simply that, avoiding any use of "socialism." I recognize that there would have to be a process of transition between class society and communism but will not delve here into what Marx and other thinkers had to say about this and the merits of their views, which is less important than the analysis of what has happened in history.⁵²

When looking at AES societies from this book's perspective that maintains that at the very least transition towards communism is possible and desirable, the most important question is whether they were in transition to communism or not. To put it differently: were social relations changing in ways that meant that the arrangements bred by capitalism and other forms of class society were starting to be replaced with new ones that had the potential to eventually flower in the withering away of class division, markets, and state power? Was there "direct control by the people of the whole administration of the community"?⁵³ Was there what in the early twentieth century was called "industrial democracy"?⁵⁴ In other words, were freely associating producers at least starting to implement democratic economic planning to replace the regulation of production by markets and other forces? This is the essential criterion for assessing whether transition to communism is taking place. Both political and economic democracy would be necessary features of evolution in the direction of communism because of precisely what communism would be. There would have to be democratic decision making about what goods and services would be produced and how work was organized as well as about all other concerns of the community. This far-reaching practice of participatory democracy would necessarily take place through new, profoundly democratic institutions created by the direct producers themselves — "not rule *for* the masses but *by* them."⁵⁵ These and other new public institutions under democratic control, including armed forces to defend the new society against external attacks and any counter-revolutionary attempt to overthrow it from within, would replace the states through which capitalists rule. The nature of the process would determine what would actually be accomplished. No one has expressed this more clearly than Rosa Luxemburg, who, using "socialism" here as equivalent to "communism" in the sense in which I am using it, wrote shortly before her murder that

the establishment of the socialist order of society ... requires a complete transformation of the state and a complete overthrow of the economic and social foundations of society. This transformation and this overthrow cannot be decreed by any bureau, committee, or parliament. It can be begun and carried out only by the masses of people themselves. In all previous revolutions a small minority of the people led the revolutionary struggle, gave it aim and direction, and used the mass only as an instrument to carry its interests, the interests of the minority, through to victory. The socialist revolution is the first which is in the interests of the great majority and can be brought to victory only by the great majority of the working people themselves. The mass of the proletariat must do more than stake out clearly the aims and direction of the revolution. It must also personally, by its own activity, bring socialism step by step into life. The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great labouring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free, and autonomous direction.⁵⁶

All this needs to be at the front of our minds when we analyze social relations in AES societies, centred on the mode of production and the form of state power. We cannot rely on what top leaders in these societies said or wrote about what was happening; that would not be a historical materialist approach. It is worth remembering that when it came to the study of history, Marx poured scorn on relying on what people said about what they were doing:

Just as in private life one distinguishes between what a man [*sic*] thinks and says, and what he really is and does, so one must all the more in historical conflicts make the distinction between the fine words and aspirations of the parties from their real organisation and their real interests, their image from their reality.⁵⁷

It is social reality, not what has been said about it, that we need to analyze.

Thus the perspective of this book is a communist one. It is also one with “a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and antipathies — open and undisguised — seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the causal laws of their movement.”⁵⁸ This perspective does not mean that

it is uncritical of AES — far from it. Here it is necessary to anticipate an objection from some on the left: that this way of evaluating AES is anti-communist. Writer Michael Parenti labels all criticism of AES by people who consider themselves on the left (except mild criticism by supporters of AES like himself) as “left anticommunism.” This is a classic amalgam. It lumps together quite different ways of criticizing AES, including the criticism of social democrats who truly are anti-communist along with the arguments of anti-capitalists who criticize AES for not being in transition to communism, and daubs them all with the brush of anti-communism, associating them with McCarthyism. Parenti assumes precisely what he needs to demonstrate, namely that AES societies were moving towards communism. He writes dismissively that “whether we call ... [them] ‘socialist’ is a matter of definition. Suffice it to say, they constituted something different from what existed in the profit-driven capitalist world.”⁵⁹ How they were different and how this was significant from the perspective of transition towards communism goes unexplained. Parenti responds to the argument that AES was not in transition to communism by labelling it a “‘pure socialism’ view [that] is ahistorical and nonfalsifiable; it cannot be tested against the actualities of history.”⁶⁰ Again, this is intellectual sleight of hand: it just assumes that AES societies must have been developing towards communism. Missing is any attempt to develop a case based on the evidence of “the actualities of history” that demonstrates that they were. Parenti’s kind of objection is shallow and evasive. It is a weak attempt to deflect historical materialist evaluation of AES by repeating assumptions instead of offering serious arguments.

A question raised by this book’s project of understanding and evaluating AES is how do we know what we know about these societies? What sources can we trust? There are good reasons for skepticism, but also bad ones. The most common ways these societies are depicted today — the ones usually encountered in schooling, in the mainstream media, and so on — are influenced by anti-communism of the kind that runs through *The Black Book of Communism*. Portraying Communist societies as ruled by evil totalitarian forces solely “responsible for 100 million deaths, making it [communism] the most lethal force in all of human history”⁶¹ is profoundly wrong. In academia, it amounts to a case for the anti-communist prosecution masquerading as scholarship. As Greene argues,

it distorts the historical record to attribute every possible death to communism to reach the magic figure of 100 million. This gives *The Black Book* [and similar depictions] the impression of atrocity porn with inflated body counts and massacres without any regard to context. Whether the Soviet Union was at war or peace are [*sic*] not taken into account ... Courtois [the book's chief editor] makes no distinction between intentional killings and those who died from neglect or other causes.⁶²

Less outrageous anti-communist presentations of AES societies past and present often contain plenty of inaccuracies and rely on dubious ways of explaining how AES functions. The main explanation is usually totalitarianism. This boils down to the idea of an all-powerful state run by a single party controlling all aspects of society and using terror to rule the population. As Greene notes, this “cannot explain the internal dynamics of the Soviet Union since it posits a completely static society ruled by unchallenged terror.”⁶³ Changes within AES societies and the collapse of AES in most of the countries in which it had been established demonstrate the flimsiness of theories of totalitarianism.

That said, the inaccuracies and faulty interpretations found in so many depictions of AES do not justify the more or less uncritical attitude to these societies taken by some of their supporters (some of whom self-identify as Marxist-Leninists [MLs]). The flimsiness of anti-communist accounts does not justify naïve or dishonest portrayals of AES that ignore or dismiss well-established evidence. For example, the archives of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (generally known by its Russian initials, NKVD) reveal that in 1937–38 its forces executed 681,692 people. Using these and other records that became available after the collapse of the USSR, historians J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov estimate that in the 1930s close to 1.5 million people were executed or died in the prisons, forced labour camps (Gulag camps), labour colonies, and special settlements that made up the vast carceral system of the country at the time. This does not include the deaths of peasants forced into internal exile in the early 1930s and those who died in the famine of 1932–33.⁶⁴ Such reliable research allows us to understand Parenti's regretful admission that Stalin executed “hundreds of Old Bolshevik leaders”⁶⁵ (true, but the NKVD executed *hundreds of thousands* of people in 1937–38 alone) as the minimization of repression that it is.⁶⁶ We would do well to remember historian E.H. Carr's

argument that a historian "must seek to bring into the picture all known or knowable facts relevant, in one sense or another, to the theme on which he [*sic*] is engaged and to the interpretation proposed."⁶⁷

There are many problems with both anti-communist and apologetic accounts of AES. But it is still possible to come to reliable understandings of what these societies were like and what the remaining few are like today. This task requires, first, careful attention to the sources used by historians and other researchers and how they use them. We also need to pay close attention to how they understand what it is that they are studying. Anyone thinking about a society, past or present, has ideas about what kind of society it is, how it works, and how change happens. These ideas are usually unconscious and contradictory. Sometimes they are consciously thought through in a systematic way (as I have sketched out this book's approach in the previous pages). We all have some kind of social theory in our heads whether we realize it or not.⁶⁸ These ideas inevitably affect how we make sense of society, how we explain events and the ways in which societies stay the same or change over time. To use the example of NKVD executions in 1937–38, approximately how many people were killed is no longer disputed. What remains a matter of debate are the causes and significance of these mass executions. Do they reveal the essence of communism (as many anti-communists say)? Were they a terrible error made by Stalin while he led the USSR along the road towards communism (as Stalin's successors said)? Were they an orgy of violence by reactionary rulers who blocked further progress towards that goal or who were a new exploiting class (as anti-Stalinist communists argue)?

Unfortunately, different ways of understanding facts like the mass executions of the Great Purge are not all that can make it challenging to make sense of AES. We are now living in societies in which facts and truth are often in doubt. There is now, as writer Richard Seymour argues, "a *radical scepticism about reality*." This is connected to "the fact that so much of social reality is now composed of mass-produced digital images, to the point where the edges separating real from unreal begin to dissolve."⁶⁹ Yet the "corrosion of trust" is not just about this dimension of everyday life. For years corporations have "been engaged in the mass industrial production of scientific doubt, whether it is about the effects of tobacco or the effects of carbon emissions." Media corporations are driven to circulate inaccurate reports. At root, the acid eating away at

trust in facts and truth is being produced by what capitalism is doing to ties between people, the ties that allow us to trust each other. Since “knowledge *depends* on trust, not scepticism,”⁷⁰ the decline of trust has dire consequences for understanding society. As writer Naomi Klein puts it, “suspicion directed at the wrong target is a very dangerous thing.”⁷¹ More people become open to believing conspiracy theories and accepting far right lies. This social environment also makes more people open to the view that all or almost all of what we hear about the negative features of AES is false, nothing more than anti-communist lies and distortions. Anyone encountering debates about AES should bear this in mind.

The USSR was the first society in which the government declared that socialism had been built as a step toward communism. It was there that the distinctive model of organizing society that came to be known as AES came into existence at the end of the 1920s with what was called the “Great Break.” For that reason the next chapter looks at the Russian Revolution of 1917 and what happened to it over the years that followed. The third chapter looks at the USSR from 1928 until its collapse in 1991. The next chapters examine two other AES societies, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Cuba. We need to consider China because in the 1960s and 1970s it was seen by many people around the world as a progressive socialist alternative to the USSR, while in recent years more people who oppose US imperialism have become sympathetic to China. Cuba will be discussed because it is the only AES society in the Americas and one whose government has enjoyed wide support on the global left, including among some anti-Stalinist marxists who have viewed Cuban society as not burdened by the kind of conservative bureaucracy that ruled the USSR and the PRC. This is followed by a look at objections to my analysis of AES and a deeper examination of what kind of society AES is. The next chapter discusses why AES and the ML political tradition linked to it matter today, in a world of worsening ecological and social crises caused by capitalism. Then follows an introduction to the tradition of communist politics that is deeply critical of AES. The book concludes by asking “What can we hope for?” and whether transition towards communism is possible.

Before proceeding to look at the origins of AES I will repeat what should already be obvious to good-faith readers: none of the criticism of AES or its supporters in what follows should in any way be construed

as justification of capitalism or as lending support to anti-communism. The perspective of reconstructed historical materialist critique yearning for human emancipation that I bring to bear on AES is, as the final chapter will make plain, one that needs to be applied universally in the world today.

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 2

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: FROM 1917 TO THE “GREAT BREAK”

FROM THE FALL OF THE EMPIRE TO WORKING-CLASS RULE

BEFORE ITS DOWNFALL IN 1917, the Russian Empire encompassed a vast territory across Eurasia.¹ Its dominant class of landlords and capitalists was headed by the monarchy of the Tsar. It ruled over a society in which capitalist zones coexisted with vast rural areas of pre-capitalist agriculture. In 1914, over 82 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Most of the Tsar’s subjects were peasants. The working class, made up of urban and rural wage-workers and their dependents, was a minority, 15 to 20 percent of the population.² Economic development in the society run by the Tsarist state lagged far behind what existed in the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe. However, the state had enabled “partial advances in specific areas.” It was “driven by military competition to introduce limited industrialization and partial agrarian reform.”³ The state was able to foster pockets of advanced capitalist industry and an urban working class. Capitalist development generated fierce antagonism between capital and labour. This conflict was intensified by the weakness of democratic rights under the repressive monarchy. It also fed into and was in turn fed by the antagonism between peasants and landlords, and by the resistance to Russian domination of other nations in the multinational Tsarist empire. This situation was potentially explosive, and World War I acted as a detonator. The war led to food shortages, the requisitioning of farm animals for the army, inflation that bit deeply into the buying power of peasant incomes and workers’ wages, and widespread disaffection among soldiers and sailors.⁴

The result was a social revolution unlike any other in world history. It began in February 1917 when workers and soldiers demanding peace and an end to hunger and exploitation rose up and toppled the