

Communism In Crisis

The Beijing Massacre and the recent dramatic events in Poland and Hungary emphasise that the socialist world is splitting up into reformers and monoliths. Gareth Stedman Jones traces the origins of its breakdown.

In May 1968 when student demonstrations had brought the French government to the verge of collapse, it is reported that General de Gaulle made a secret visit to General Massu to discover whether the army would intervene to restore order if the need arose. In the event, the troops were not called in; conservative sentiment within the civilian population was effectively mobilised and the legitimacy of the government preserved.

It may be presumed that Deng Xiao Ping would have followed General de Gaulle's course of action in June had the option been open to him. But it seems clear that it was not. Popular sentiment in Beijing was mounting daily, even hourly, against him. Neither the party, the police, nor the locally-based military could be relied upon to halt the process of popular mobilisation. Unable to find any accessible source of legitimacy in civil society and incapable of activating its day-to-day apparatus of political authority, the Communist Party abdicated. Its mandate from heaven was irretrievably lost. Political power was surrendered to the military and the result was an act of

sickening and mindless terror - a sordid and inhuman end to a great movement whose awesome achievements had once attracted all that was most noble and courageous in 20th-century China to its banner.

Thus, if May 1989 had begun by resembling May 1968, by June it had come to resemble June 1848 when hardened generals like Cavaignac and Windischgratz led raw and uneducated soldiers, fed on tales of the corruption and decadence of the towns, against the democratic students and workers of Paris and Vienna.

If 1848, rather than the previous history of communism, suggests a better point of comparison, it is because, by acting in the way in which it did, the Communist Party leadership turned itself into a form of *ancien regime* and engaged in a form of violence which marks a break with its communist past. Twenty years ago hundreds of thousands of Chinese people perished in the cultural revolution and 50 years ago millions died in the campaigns and purges which followed Soviet collectivisation. From the suppression of the *Kronstadt* rising in the early days of the Russian revolution through the quelling of political rebellions in Berlin, Budapest and Prague in the 1950s and

1960s, violence has been an inseparable accompaniment to the history of 20th-century communism.

But this sombre and terrifying sequence of events bears only a superficial resemblance to the violence unleashed in Tiananmen Square. It forms part of a history which is now past; it belongs to an epoch in which a world communist movement considered itself to be engaged in mortal combat with the forces of capitalism, imperialism and reaction. However terrible the initiatives of Stalin and Mao, they can only be understood within this frame. The purges and the cultural revolution were the effects of mass revolutionary processes in which millions were mesmerised and gripped by a radical demonology, a civil war waged between the imaginary social categories conjured up by political rhetoric. They can no more be attributed to the well-oiled machinery of totalitarianism than can the aroused fury of radical Islam unleashed by the Ayatollah in Iran. Similarly, the Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe in the '50s and '60s were also presented as the armed defence of an international revolution under threat.

Violence and metaphors of violence dominated communist language from

the beginnings of bolshevism. The class war was a war, and the tactics of the vanguard party were conceived as battle engagements. The Communist Party was thus an instrument designed for war; its unique power derived from the recruitment of civilian energy within a quasi-military formation governed by clear lines of command. From the time of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done*, the party's purpose was to concentrate and lead the social forces in the revolutionary struggle, and to divide and disperse state power and its reactionary supports.

The original rationale of Lenin's strategy lay in the special conditions of Tsarist Russia - an autocratic regime and thus, the necessity for the party to work clandestinely. After the success of 1917, this animating idea was extended to all states in which the new communist parties were to operate. From the foundation of the Comintern, the international communist movement was to act as one, both in leading the class struggle in particular countries and in defending the first workers' states, threatened on every side by the manoeuvres of world capitalist encirclement.

Out of this emerges the particular communist stance towards democracy: democracy was desirable, but a luxury in a situation in which the international proletarian cause was assailed by counter-revolution and fascism. According to the theory of democratic centralism, decisions within the party were supposed to be arrived at by a democratic process but, once laid down, the line was to be followed by all. It was within this manichean framework held from 1917 through 1956, that communists were able to live with and defend even the most stupefying changes of tactic and the most unacceptable uses of coercion.

It is now difficult to understand what looks like the immense credulity of the supporters of communism, unless the foundation of this belief is remembered: that is, that it was capitalism that was in crisis, while communism represented the hope of the future.

Such a view seemed to be borne out by the facts of mass unemployment and depression, of the violence of colonialism and imperialism and of the unreason underpinning fascism and other rightwing movements. But, above all, communism seemed to have the solution to the intractable problems and

the devastating human waste which capitalism had engendered.

The proclaimed success of Soviet collectivisation and the first five-year plan forced economists and politicians in the capitalist world to consider the necessity to control capitalism through some form of economic planning. Roosevelt's New Deal, some 'Keynesian planning' for full employment and even the National Socialist strategy in Germany to create full employment through directed public works and rearmament were in part influenced by the Soviet example. It is easy to forget that this perception of communist economy persisted into the 1960s. China had attained greater growth rates than India and Khrushchev could confidently boast "we will bury you" when talking of the strategy of 'peaceful coexistence'.

It was not until the 1970s that such beliefs, both in the communist and in the capitalist sphere, were radically transformed. In the 30 years since 1945,

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mass democracy had become the norm in Western European countries and the promises of better living standards which apologists for capitalism had been making for a hundred years, became a perceived reality for the majority of the population in industrialised countries.

The perceived success of the communist model in underdeveloped countries in the 1950s was also increasingly challenged: the early successes of China and North Korea were now matched by the growth produced by capitalism in such 'underdeveloped' countries as South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. Conversely, in the communist world, leaders and party officials had been forced to face up to the incompetence and, indeed, impotence of their economies to provide basic consumer needs and to compete in the field of new technologies, civil and military, which were rapidly developing in the West. Even more galling, it was becoming apparent that such incompetence and failure could no longer be attributed to a legacy of backwardness, but were

consequences of this communist command economy itself.

This was a moment of truth of inestimable significance. It put into question the very idea of a communist state-led economy. The choice confronting communist states was either to maintain self-sufficiency (but also isolation) at the cost of declining standards of living, growing political dissent and increasing technological disadvantage; or else, to open themselves to new forms of economic thinking, attract foreign investment, and to allow for the growth of unregulated market sectors. While smaller socialist countries like Cuba or Vietnam could pursue the first choice, for the communist superpowers themselves this choice was ultimately impossible. The Soviet Union was already becoming dependent on the American wheat surplus from as early as 1927 and the intensification of the Cold War in the early 1980s imposed an intolerable strain on the stagnant domestic economy. In China, the experience of the cultural revolution was a vivid illustration of the consequences of attempting to isolate the communist state from the world.

But if this choice was ultimately incapable, the political costs were heavy. For economic liberalisation could not but erode the core of beliefs, both dirigiste and egalitarian, which had animated and sustained communism through the first two-thirds of the 20th century. It necessarily meant the abandonment of a manichean world view in which the communist party had the leading role to play. The warlike metaphors of leninism no longer possessed purchase in the domestic or the international sphere. The egalitarian priorities of old communist leaderships were now qualified by the language of market efficiency and the necessity of nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit. In the USSR in the Brezhnev era these contradictions were resisted or ignored. But with the advent of Gorbachev the need for basic changes, political as well as economic, was confronted.

In China, on the other hand, the policy was more contradictory. Modernisation was declared a priority, foreign investment was welcomed and tens of thousands of students were sent to study abroad. The emergence of a new rich class was openly encouraged and even the army was urged to contribute to its support through involvement in busi-

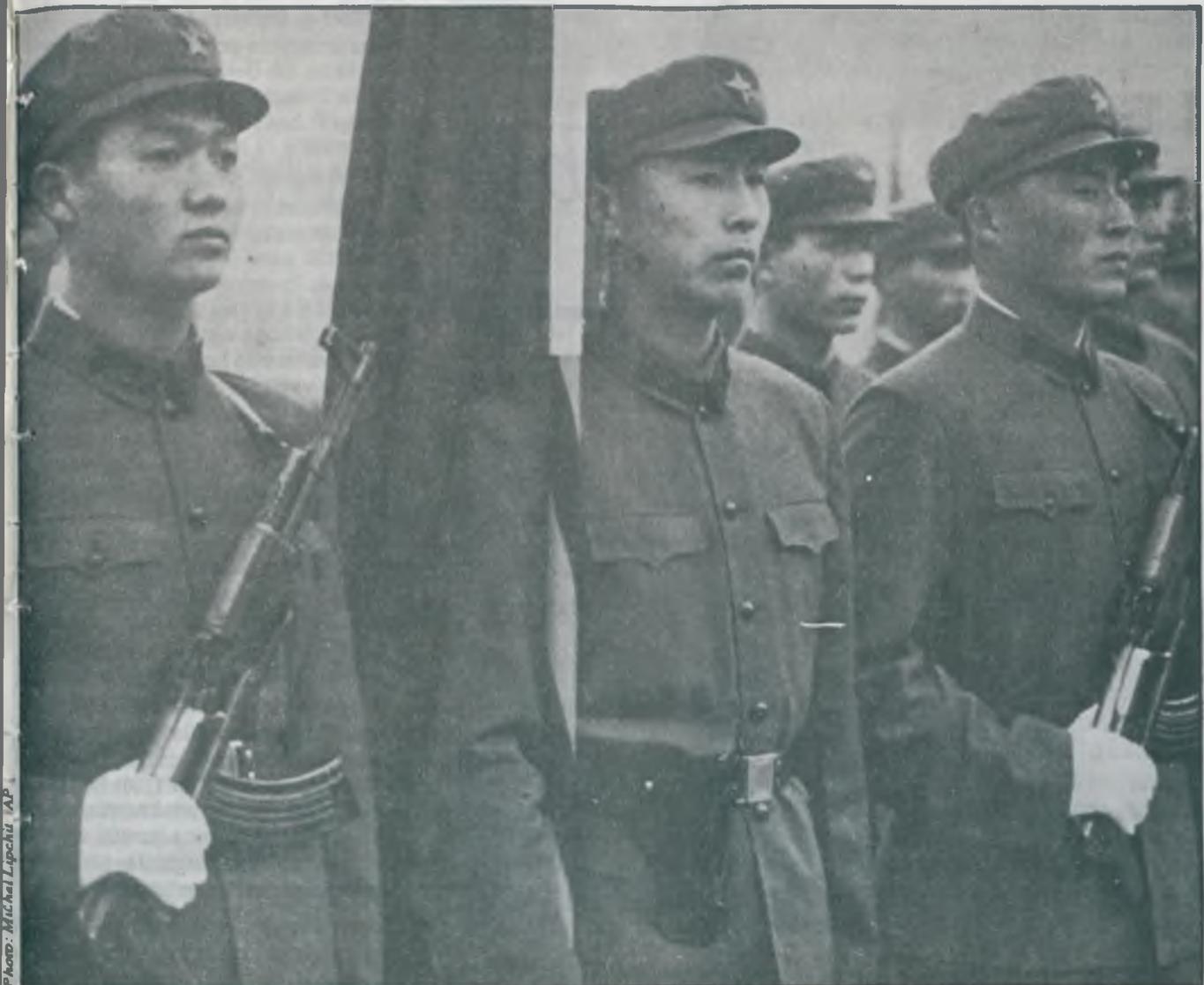


Photo: Michael Lipschitz AP

Chinese troops parade in front of the National assembly building in Beijing

ness activities. Yet, at the same time, the marxist-leninist organisation of state and party was kept largely unchanged. As the bankers moved in, and as friendship with the United States became the cornerstone of foreign policy, the modernisation of China was announced by Deng to rest on 'four cardinal principles': the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party and the fidelity to marxism-leninism and Mao Zedong thought.

Such a combination could not be sustained for long, as hardliners had always warned. Along with the import of commodities and technologies came the import of ideas which inspired new and more worldly ambitions among the young. The rhetoric of revolutionary intransigence was belied by the actions of government itself. And when stu-

dents organised sit-ins and hunger strikes and when banners were waved in English as well as Chinese as the world's press corps looked on, there were neither procedures nor precedents to fall back upon in response. The language of leninism was no longer able to encompass these phenomena. Its once powerful dicta now sounded hollow and formulaic. In previous popular upsurges rebels had been denounced as 'running dogs', 'lackeys of American imperialism' or as 'capitalist roaders'. What conviction could this language now possess?

It was perhaps a tacit recognition of the new situation that the government did not in fact employ it. Instead, students and workers were denounced in terms more reminiscent of the sewer metaphors of 1848 - as 'rats' and as 'social dregs'. In China, marxism-

leninism was at the end of the road, both in word and deed. 'Put politics in command' had been Lenin's first injunction and on the basis of this pronouncement, two of the most powerful armies in the world had remained for fifty years firmly under Communist Party control. Now, bereft of any further ideas, the party abdicated in favour of the army and the People's Republic descended to the level of a Francoist military dictatorship.

Deng may dream of returning to normal. But there is no normality to return to. For the greater emancipatory movement in China which began on May 4, 1919, has now passed finally out of Communist Party hands.

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