What Do We Mean by a Communist System?

For Communists themselves, ‘Communism’ had two different meanings. It referred both to an international movement dedicated to the overthrow of capitalist systems and to the new society which would exist only in the future when Marx’s higher stage of socialism had been reached. Given that ruling Communist parties described their existing systems as ‘socialist’, it is reasonable to ask: what is our justification for calling them ‘Communist’? Many former Communist politicians have objected to the use of that term because, they remind us, ‘communism’ was to be the ultimate stage of socialism which they never claimed to have reached.1 Yet the members of these ruling parties described themselves as Communists, and Western scholars, categorising the systems as ‘Communist’, did not imagine for a moment that they were depicting what Marx or Lenin had in mind by the stage of ‘communism’ – that self-governing, stateless, co-operative society which has never existed anywhere. (Using a capital ‘C’ for real Communist systems, with their enormous and oppressive state power, and a lower-case ‘c’ for the imaginary, stateless ‘communism’ of the future helps to keep clear the distinction.) Communist leaders and ideologists have claimed that the countries ruled by them were – or, in the case of the five remaining Communist states, are – democratic. Yet many Western observers who would not dream of accepting the democratic credentials of these regimes have been content to take at face value Communists’ descriptions of their own system as quintessentially socialist. Communist states had (and, to the extent that they still exist, have) a distinctive political and economic organization, sharing important common features to be discussed later in the chapter. The main problem with calling them ‘socialist’ is that this term has embraced a far wider range of political parties, movements and governments than those which accepted Marxist-Leninist ideology.2 Governments have been formed, following free elections, in countries as diverse as Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Australia and Israel by people who regarded themselves as socialists, even if they never went so far
as to claim that they had created a socialist system. Indeed, in recent decades social democratic parties have moved away from the idea that a radically different socio-economic system bearing the name of socialism will ever be created. Long characterized by the evolutionary nature of their aims, these parties have become increasingly content to pursue greater social justice within an essentially market economy in which public ownership has been very much the exception rather than the rule.

Moreover, even before the most recent evolution of social democratic parties, many socialist theorists saw the essence of socialism not in centralized, statist ownership but in social or public ownership which could be in the form of co-operatives, guilds, or municipal control as well as of – or as an alternative to – nationalized industries. They saw these as inextricably linked with democratic institutions. A British political theorist, Michael Lessnoff, writing during the heyday of Communism, defined socialism succinctly as ‘democratic control of the economy’. On that basis, he had no difficulty in reaching the much more unorthodox conclusion that not only were capitalism and socialism conceptually compatible rather than irreconcilable opposites, but also that states such as the USA and Britain ‘are undoubtedly more socialist than the USSR or the People’s Republic of China’. They were certainly more democratic, and if democratic control of the economy is to be the main criterion of socialism, Lessnoff’s conclusion may be paradoxical, but it is not illogical. In political practice, continuing globalization of the economy has put stricter limits on democratic control over the economy in any one state. That is one major reason why socialists, in the non-Communist sense, have had to modify and adapt some of their former goals, although the global financial crisis of 2008 reinforced social democrats’ longstanding belief that unfettered capitalism was neither the only nor the best non-Communist answer to the world’s problems.

In contrast with the activities and aspirations of democratic socialist parties, Communist parties, in most states which came under Communist rule, were very ready to impose that form of government on the society. In at least half of all cases, this was a result of foreign support (usually, but not always, Soviet), backed by armed force, for the local Communist takeover. The parties certainly could not rely on coming to power through free elections. Communists throughout most of Europe were far less successful electorally in gaining working-class support than were socialist parties which accepted the values of pluralist democracy. Indeed, in the Western world in the twentieth century, socialism did not generally mean the body of doctrine and the political practices associated with Communist parties. Socialists and Communists could be temporary allies, but they were separated by fundamental differences concerning the relationship between means and
ends. Thus, for example, in its annual report of 1933 the highest body of the British Trade Union movement, the Trade Union Council, scoffed at the Communist claim that in capitalist states there was no freedom worth defending, observing: ‘The State has not yet the authority to shoot citizens without trial. Nor do people disappear at the hands of a secret police; nor is criticism of the Government a crime . . . The institutions of free citizenship and the organizations of democracy are our strongest safeguards.’

Although socialists of a social democratic type sometimes found themselves on the same side as the Communists – in opposing fascism, for instance, during the Comintern’s Popular Front phase and during the Second World War – in general there was a struggle within trade unions and their political wings between Communists and non-Communist socialists. The firmness of Ernest Bevin, Britain’s formidable first foreign secretary of the post-World War Two era, in opposing the policy of Stalin’s Soviet Union owed much to his experience of dealing with Communists during the inter-war years in which he built up the Transport and General Workers’ Union as the largest trade union in Western Europe. A man of great ability and self-confidence, Bevin would brook no lectures on ‘the workers’ from any Communist. He was born in a Somerset village in 1881, never knowing his father, and to a mother who died when he was eight. He had a poverty-stricken childhood and left school at the age of eleven. By the time of his death he had become the most respected British foreign secretary of the first half of the twentieth century.

In Western Europe, not least in Britain, the labour movement provided a way for talented individuals of humble origins not only to develop their own talents but also to advance and defend the interests of the social class from which they came. While in Communist countries the scale of social mobility was undoubtedly greater, this was purchased at a terrible price. It is hardly surprising that, for their part, Communist leaders and theoreticians viewed the democratic socialist parties of Western Europe as their most dangerous ideological enemies. It was very late in the Soviet era before reformist Communists in Russia and in Eastern Europe became part of a one-way convergence whereby a good many of them increasingly embraced a social democratic conception of socialism. This led a Hungarian writer to complain at the time of ‘a traffic jam on the road to Damascus’.

Communist systems vary greatly over time as well as significantly from one country to another. The early years of establishing a Communist order, including the securing of the Communist Party’s monopoly of power and the nationalization of all industry, are quite different from the period in which the fire of revolutionary zeal has died away, a party leadership has come face-to-face with long-term problems of government and development, and
a new generation has grown up under Communist rule. The differences between one Communist system and another had by the 1960s become sufficiently great that towards the end of that decade the American political scientist John H. Kautsky (the grandson of the leading Communist theorist Karl Kautsky, who at one time was known as ‘the Pope of Marxism’ but who, after attacking the Bolshevik conception of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, was dubbed by Lenin and his followers the ‘renegade Kautsky’) wrote: ‘Communism has come to mean quite different things in different minds, and quite different policies can hence be pursued in its name. As a descriptive, analytical category, “Communism” has thus become useless, that is, it is no longer meaningful to describe a particular individual, movement, organization, system, or ideology as “Communist”.’

Although an exaggeration, there was a significant element of truth in that statement, especially in relation to individuals. A point I made in the Introduction bears repetition. To be told that a person was a Communist, meaning a member of a Communist party, could convey surprisingly little about the person’s basic beliefs and values. Even at the stage of a Communist seizure of power, there were revolutionaries who joined the party with a burning desire to construct a just and harmonious society and others whose primary goal was to wreak vengeance on their class enemies and who were more interested in destroying than building. Within an established Communist system, the differences became much wider. To make only the most obvious distinction, many people with little or no interest in Marxism-Leninism opted to join the Communist Party to advance their careers, while others took the official doctrine seriously. The former could be closet social democrats or liberals, even monarchists or fascists. Many evolved into conservatives, defenders of what had become the established order in which they had found a comfortable place. Reformers could rationalize their party membership differently – by telling themselves that only from within the party would it be possible to influence the course of change within their country. The extent to which that turned out to be true, or not true, in different Communist states will emerge in later chapters.

Not only was there a wide diversity of opinion among individual members of Communist parties. There were also substantial differences from one Communist country to another, persisting to the present day, as the cases of contemporary China and North Korea clearly illustrate. Yet there are certain common features which make it entirely meaningful to call a political system Communist. When these are specified, it becomes clear that the only Communist regime that has ever existed in Latin America is that of Cuba. The Chilean government headed by Salvador Allende from 1970 until it was overthrown in a military coup in 1973 was not, by any stretch
of the imagination, Communist, although it included some members of the Communist Party in its ruling socialist coalition. And no African state has ever been Communist. The term ‘Communist’ should be used precisely and parsimoniously. It should not be applied indiscriminately to any government which contains Marxists or to Third World dictators who have employed vaguely Marxist rhetoric. It is worth noting also that a system can stop being Communist even when its ‘Communist’ rulers have not actually been overthrown. Thus, as will be argued in a later chapter, the Soviet Union ceased to be a Communist system in the course of 1989, although its chief executive was the same person at the beginning of that year and its end, namely Mikhail Gorbachev, and though the Soviet state did not come to an end until December 1991. China, as a later chapter will attempt to show, is today a hybrid, possessing still some essential features of Communism but having discarded others.

It may seem paradoxical to specify what Communist systems have in common as a prelude to showing their diversity and how they change, but it is a necessary preliminary if we are adequately to comprehend the differences between one Communist country and another and the significance of political change over time in a variety of Communist states. Of course, ‘Communism’ was used in everyday discourse throughout most of the twentieth century, especially in the years of the Cold War. Without defining the term, many people had an adequate idea of what they meant by it, though what made Communist systems different from other totalitarian or authoritarian systems was seldom spelled out. In a largely misplaced effort, political scientists who studied the USSR spent a lot of time inventing a variety of labels for the Soviet Union and arguing about which was the most appropriate, often missing the more basic point that the term which most illuminatingly encapsulated the system was Communist. Indeed, the Soviet Union was the archetypal Communist system, and hugely influential, even though the Soviet state and society themselves changed significantly over time.

The defining characteristics of a Communist system are, as I see them, six. They can be grouped into three pairs, relating, first, to the political system; second, to the economic system; and, third, to ideology. The first two categories also, of course, have substantial ideological content, but in a more operational, not merely aspirational, sense.

The Political System

The first defining feature of a Communist system is the monopoly of power of the Communist Party. In Stalin’s time this was known as ‘the dictatorship
of the proletariat’, since it was taken as axiomatic that the party represented
the interests, and the real will, of the proletariat (if they knew what was
good for them). In the post-Stalin period, especially from the beginning
of the 1960s, the more common official term was ‘the leading role of the
party’. There were other important institutions within a Communist state
besides the ruling party, among them government ministries, the military,
and the security police, but all the senior officials in the ministries were
party members, as were all military and security police officers. Every
ministry, as well as every military unit and branch of the political police,
also had its primary party organization – in the earlier days known as the
party cell. Moreover, every organization – whether ministry, military, police
or judiciary – was supervised by an appropriately specialized department of
the Central Committee of the party. Within Communist states there was
only a partial differentiation of functions and no separation of powers. All
institutions were overseen by the organs of the Communist party, which
had a higher authority than any other body.

By the beginning of the 1980s variants of the concept of the ‘leading
role of the party’ appeared in the constitutions of all consolidated
Communist states, including Vietnam, where the whole country had
been Communist only since 1976. Three examples illustrate the general
point. The relevant passage (Article 6) of the 1977 Soviet constitution
began: ‘The leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus
of its political system, of all state organizations and public organizations,
is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.’ The last sentence of the
preamble to the 1979 constitution of the Mongolian People’s Republic
read: ‘In the M.P.R., the guiding and directing force of society and of
the state is the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, which is guided
in its activities by the all-conquering theory of Marxism-Leninism.’ In
the case of Vietnam, Article 4 of the 1980 constitution declared: ‘The
Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard and general staff of the
Vietnamese working class, armed with Marxism-Leninism, is the only
force leading the state and society, and the main factor determining all
successes of the Vietnamese revolution.’

The monopoly of power of the Communist Party long preceded its
mention in most of the constitutions. Indeed, this was what the ‘dictatorship
of the proletariat’ meant in practice, since it was the party which dictated
policy in the name of the proletariat. In Communist states the politics of
power always trumped law. Courts and judges were not independent, and
in periods before the constitutions mentioned the party’s ‘leading role’,
the ruling parties in Communist countries were in no way inhibited from
dominating the other institutions of the state. It could even, therefore, be
regarded as a sign of modest progress when from the 1970s the constitutions were brought somewhat closer to existing political reality.

The second defining feature of a Communist system was a concept which has already cropped up in this book, democratic centralism – a term adopted by Lenin and invoked throughout the entire Communist era. In theory it meant that there could be discussion of issues – the ‘democratic’ component – until a decision had been reached, but thereafter the decision of higher party organs was binding and had to be implemented in a strictly disciplined manner throughout the party and society. Communist ideologists liked to compare ‘democratic centralism’ (good) with ‘bureaucratic centralism’ (bad). The latter denoted party officials acting in a high-handed manner, not taking into account the views of party members, including party committees at various levels, even in the early stages of policy-making. In political reality, democratic centralism was bureaucratic centralism. It became the codename for a rigidly hierarchical, severely disciplined party in which rights of discussion and debate were rigorously circumscribed. Though in principle many different interpretations of ‘democratic centralism’ could be offered, in practice in Communist systems the slogan was appropriated, at times of intra-party struggle, by those who wished to maintain strictly hierarchical, disciplined relations within the ruling party, to restrict free debate, and to prevent horizontal, as distinct from vertical, links between party organizations. It became both the name for a defining feature of Communist systems and the euphemism for one of the pillars on which such systems rested.

A combination of the Communist Party’s ‘leading role’ and its highly centralized character meant that a vast amount of power was concentrated in the highest party organs – the Central Committee with its powerful Secretariat and departments. Even more power lay with its inner body, the Politburo (Political Bureau) and in the hands of the individual who stood at the apex of the system, the General Secretary. The relationship between the individual top leader and the Politburo varied greatly over time and from one country to another. In other words, while oligarchical rule has been the norm in a majority of Communist countries at most times, the power of the top leader in a number of instances has been such that the system became essentially autocratic – a personal dictatorship rather than collective rule by an oligarchy. The elevation of the party leader over his colleagues reached extreme heights under Stalin during the second and third of his three decades in power in the Soviet Union, under Mao Zedong in China, and under Kim Il-Sung and then his son Kim Jong-Il in North Korea. The pronouncements of Stalin, from at least the mid-1930s until his death in 1953, were accorded a status which put them on a par with
those of Marx and Lenin. In China, ‘Mao Zedong Thought’, understood as the definitive adaptation of Marxism to Chinese conditions, was raised on a pedestal higher than Leninism. Even after some modification of the ‘cult of personality’ of Mao soon after his death, the 1978 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China put Mao’s thought on a level comparable to that of Marx and Lenin. Article 2 of that constitution stated: ‘The guiding ideology of the People’s Republic of China is Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.’ As for North Korea, Kim Il-sung has been modestly described by the ruling Communist Party as ‘superior to Christ in love, superior to Buddha in benevolence, superior to Confucius in virtue and superior to Mohammed in justice’.12

The Economic System

The third defining feature of a consolidated Communist system is non-capitalist ownership of the means of production, and linked to this is the fourth – the dominance of a command economy, as distinct from a market economy. Even in established Communist systems some private economic activity continued, whether on a legal or illegal basis – or, quite commonly, as a mixture of both. In agriculture, in particular, exceptions in favour of private enterprise were not uncommon, and in two of the systems (Yugoslavia and Poland) the preponderant part of agriculture was in private hands. However, non-agricultural production within established Communist systems was state owned and controlled. State or social ownership of the means of production was regarded as one of the basic objectives of all ruling Communist parties.

This was combined with the fourth defining feature of a Communist system – a command economy. Its essential features are well summarized by Philip Hanson, a prominent specialist on the Soviet economy:

The fundamental difference from a market economy was that decisions about what should be produced and in what quantities, and at what prices that output should be sold, were the result of a hierarchical, top-down process culminating in instructions ‘from above’ to all producers; they were not the result of decentralised decisions resulting from interactions between customers and suppliers. Producers were concerned above all to meet targets set by planners. They had no particular reason to concern themselves with the wishes of the users of their products, nor with the activities of competitors. Indeed the concept of competition was absent: other producers in the same line of activity were simply not competitors but fellow-executors of the state plan.13
There were ministries for each major branch of industry, which were in turn supervised by the state planning committee and by departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. At the apex of the system was the Politburo, for the polity and economy were even more intertwined in Communist than in capitalist states.

While there was scope for disagreement among Communists on how the economy should be organized, the overtly ideological character of the system also imposed limits. If leaders were to go beyond these, they would be embarking on the risky path of systemic change. As the political economist Alec Nove put it: ‘Ideological commitment limits choice. Most people, presented with a cheese and a ham sandwich, can choose either. An Orthodox rabbi can not. The Bolsheviks could not choose to revive the Stolypin reform, or long tolerate a mixed economy.’

Thus, all four features of a Communist system discussed so far – the leading role of the Communist Party, democratic centralism, state ownership of the means of production, and a command rather than market economy – have a strong ideological component. They were part of the belief system of the Bolsheviks and of their Communist successors who held that ‘socialism’, as they understood that concept, was not only a higher stage of development than capitalism, but also one which was inevitable. However, the process could be speeded up, and successfully directed, only if political power was firmly in the hands of the party. These defining features of Communism, while ideologically significant, were also of clear organizational importance. They were part of the operational code of Communist rule with an everyday relevance to the task of maintaining power. That was obviously true of the monopoly of power of a highly disciplined ruling party. The merging of political and economic power served the same purpose. The absence of private ownership and a market economy meant that the state had control over the career possibilities of all its citizens. To fall foul of the state authorities at times led to imprisonment or death. Even, however, in more relaxed periods of Communist rule, to dissent publicly from the state authorities meant that a person’s career was threatened, for there was no one else you could turn to for employment.

The Ideological Sphere

Communism was an all-encompassing system of beliefs. It purported to offer a key to understanding social development. It had authorities whose word could not be questioned, and whose interpreters and guardians acted also as gatekeepers, deciding who ‘belonged’ and who did not. The last
two defining features of a Communist system belong, even more than the previous four, to this ideological sphere. The fifth such feature of a Communist system I take to be the declared aim of building communism as the ultimate, legitimizing goal. Clearly, in terms of everyday politics, this was much less important than the ‘leading role’ of the party or democratic centralism. It was, though, a feature which differentiated Communist systems both from other totalitarian or authoritarian regimes and from countries governed by socialist parties of a social democratic type. It had an important place in the official ideology, even though it was not of immediate practical import. In the early years after a Communist party had come to power, the idea of the building of communism doubtless had some motivational and inspirational significance for at least a substantial number of party activists. As years went by, though, there were ever fewer believers in the notion of a harmonious society in which the state would have withered away. And yet a Communist leadership could not renounce this goal without abandoning one of the sources of their legitimacy (such as that was). As Nove put it, writing in early 1989 when dramatic change in the Soviet system was under way:

The essential point is that the open debate is now concerned with the very essence, the fundamentals, of the Soviet system – this for the first time in living memory. What kind of society did they have, and where are they now? Where are they going? One has a feeling that no one quite knows. Does this matter? After all, where are we going? In the Soviet Union it does matter, since the legitimacy of party rule rests upon its role of leading the people towards a goal.15

If political activity knows, in the words of Michael Oakeshott, ‘neither starting-place nor appointed destination’,16 a political party could not claim the right to rule on the grounds that it had discerned how to guide society to an ultimate goal. It was because, however, Marxist-Leninist ideologists claimed that there was an appointed destination – that of communism, the classless, self-administering society – that they could justify the permanent exercise of the leading role of the Communist party. It was that party which possessed the theoretical insight and the practical experience to guide less advanced citizens to this radiant future.

While successive leaders of ruling Communist parties sincerely believed in the ‘leading role’ of the party and in democratic centralism, since this directly served their interests, it is open to doubt whether any Soviet party leader after Nikita Khrushchev (who headed the CPSU from 1953 until his forcible removal in 1964) believed in the future communist society in
anything like Marx’s or Lenin’s sense. The same scepticism is in order about East European Communist leaders. However, whatever their private reservations, none of these leaders could publicly renounce the destination, for they led a goal-directed party and society. The doyen of Australian specialists on Communist systems, T.H. Rigby, wrote some years ago:

In communist societies the structural and ideological features of a country totally mobilised for war have been converted into a permanent, ‘normal’ condition. The ‘war’, however, in which they engaged, is the ‘struggle for communism’. ‘Our Goal is Communism!’ proclaims the enormous banner in the machine-shop, and indeed it is in terms of this goal that the Politburo justifies its Five-Year Plan guidelines, that Gosplan spells these out into annual and quarterly plans for the industry concerned, and that the ministry running it translates into specific targets for the particular plant, and the latter’s management sets the tasks of individual workshops and workers.\(^\text{17}\)

The final goal was the justification for all the toil and hardship that might be encountered along the way. Once that goal was abandoned, Communist regimes were in danger of being judged – and found wanting – on the basis of their capacity to deliver more immediate results. Without the goal of communism, the ‘leading role’ of the party would become far harder to legitimize. The moment leaders were to come clean on the fact that their aspirations were for more mundane improvements and that communism was a mythical heaven-on-earth, Communist parties could no longer be perceived as the possessors of sacred truth, and political religion would give way to secularization.

That the last leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, although devoted to what he called the ‘socialist idea’, had long been sceptical about the ultimate goal of communism was evident from the fact that he recalled with relish a joke from Khrushchev’s time, albeit committing it to print only after the Soviet Union had ceased to exist:

A certain lecturer, speaking about future communist society, concluded with the following remarks, ‘The breaking day of communism is already visible, gleaming just over the horizon.’ At this point an old peasant who had been sitting in the front row stood up and asked, ‘Comrade Lecturer, what is a horizon?’ The lecturer explained that it is a line where the earth and the sky seem to meet, having the unique characteristic that the more you move toward it, the more it moves away. The old peasant responded: ‘Thank you, Comrade Lecturer. Now everything is quite clear.’\(^\text{18}\)
The sixth defining feature of Communism was the existence of, and sense of belonging to, an international Communist movement. This did not necessarily mean that the party concerned was officially called the ‘Communist Party’. Communist parties in many countries changed their names over time, whether in an attempt to broaden the base of their support or to suggest that they were offering something new. Thus, for example, the Hungarian party, throughout the period 1948–89, was known successively as the Hungarian Communist Party, the Hungarian Workers’ Party, and the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. What mattered was that Communists both within and outside Hungary recognized the party as Communist. Equally, their opponents had no difficulty in similarly identifying them. In this book I use not only the official title of such a party at any given time but also the generic term Communist party, for any ruling or non-ruling party accepted as a member of the international Communist movement.

The existence of that movement was of great ideological significance. It was the supposed internationalism of Communism which attracted many of its adherents. Stalin had, of course, recognized the reality of the Soviet Union’s early isolation when he came up with the doctrine of ‘socialism in one country’, and even the Communist International – the Comintern – had served above all Soviet interests. Yet there was a dual-track policy in Moscow whereby the Comintern concerned themselves with the international Communist movement while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealt with the more immediately practical business of state-to-state relations. The Comintern was abolished in 1943, when the Soviet Union was in coalition with the Western democracies in the war against Hitler’s Germany. Between 1947 and 1956 a body called the Cominform (the Communist Information Bureau) existed, but it had both a more limited membership and more limited functions than the Comintern. The real successor to the Comintern in terms of keeping an eye on non-ruling Communist parties and revolutionary movements was the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The continuity was exemplified in the person of Boris Ponomarev, who from 1955 until 1985 headed the International Department, having in the 1930s served on the staff of Georgi Dimitrov in the Comintern. The International Department provided not only guidance and encouragement but also frequently monetary help for non-ruling Communist parties, including small ones which seemed unlikely ever to come to power.

For individual members of Communist parties the consciousness of belonging to a great international movement was of huge importance, the more so if their own party occupied only a small part of the political spectrum in their home country. Writing in 1969, Eric Hobsbawm, a distinguished
historian and longstanding member of the Communist Party, whose childhood was spent in Central Europe and his adult life in Britain, observed:

Today, when the international communist movement has largely ceased to exist as such, it is hard to recapture the immense strength which its members drew from the consciousness of being soldiers in a single international army, operating, with whatever tactical multiformity and flexibility, a single grand strategy of world revolution. Hence the impossibility of any fundamental or long-term conflict between the interest of a national movement and the International, which was the real party, of which the national units were no more than disciplined sections.20

Raphael Samuel was born almost two decades later than Hobsbawm, the son of a militant Communist mother. He himself joined the CPGB but, when still a young man, became a leading figure in ‘the first New Left’ of British intellectuals who broke with Communism, but not with Marxism.21 He too testifies to the significance of internationalism for true Communist believers. At one with Hobsbawm in his emphasis on the supranational, his imagery is, in contrast, far more religious than military:

The Communism of my childhood was universalist. We no longer advocated World Revolution, but we believed that socialism was a cosmic process, and though allowing for the existence of national peculiarities (we only half believed in them), we thought of the transition from capitalism to socialism as being ‘identical’ in content everywhere. Communism, like medieval Christendom, was one and indivisible, an international fellowship of faith . . . ‘one great vision’ uniting us, in the words of a communist song. Internationalism was not an option but a necessity of our political being, a touchstone of honour and worth.22

Among members of the worldwide Communist movement, there were many who were genuinely devoted to the ideal of internationalism, but since they recognized the unique role of the Soviet Union as the country which had successfully put their ideology in power, and which thus served as a teacher and exemplar, they became vulnerable to being used as instruments of Soviet state policy and of shifting coalitions within the highest power structures in Moscow. ‘What convinced in Lenin,’ Hobsbawm has written, ‘was not so much his socio-economic analysis . . . but his palpable genius for organizing a revolutionary party and mastering the tactics and strategy of making a revolution.’23 For non-ruling parties the international Communist movement was, accordingly, something to which they for long
voluntarily submitted, believing both in its collective wisdom and in the special authority which accrued to the party that had been led by Lenin.

To be recognized as part of the international Communist movement by the existing members distinguished Communist countries and parties from socialist governments and parties of a social democratic type. Given that the Soviet and other Communist states described themselves as ‘socialist’, being accepted as a member meant conforming to ‘socialism’ in their terms. For many Communist governments, this was unproblematical, since they owed their existence to Soviet support, but it involved accepting Soviet leadership (and at times crude domination) of the international Communist movement. For Communist parties which had made their own revolutions – as was the case, for example, with Albania, China and Yugoslavia – it was much more difficult to accommodate themselves to Soviet hegemony. Their relationship with the Soviet-dominated international Communist movement will be discussed in later chapters. Other countries, in which Communist rule had been installed under the aegis of the Soviet Union, in due course also found ways of asserting their independence. Some of them ceased to meet several of the six criteria of a Communist system even before the ruling party lost its monopoly of power. The variety of ways in which that happened is explored in Parts 4 and 5 of this book. Before that, however, we need to examine the spread of Communism from the Second World War until Stalin’s death – the theme of Part 2.