

Who Won the Cold War?

by Wayne Allensworth

The Red Flag: A History of Communism
by David Priestland
New York: Grove Press
688 pp., \$30.00

IN HIS FOREWORD TO *WITNESS*, Whitaker Chambers, writing in the “form of a letter to my children,” tries to explain the appeal of communism:

I see in Communism the focus of the concentrated evil of our time. You will ask: Why, then, do men become Communists? How did it happen that you, our gentle and loved father, was once a Communist? Were you simply stupid? No, I was not stupid. Were you morally depraved? No, I was not morally depraved. Indeed, educated men become Communists chiefly for moral reasons. Did you not know that the crimes and horrors of Communism are inherent in Communism? Yes, I knew that fact. Then why did you become a Communist? It would help more to ask: How did it happen that this movement, once a mere muttering of political outcasts, became the immense force that now contests the mastery of mankind? Even when all the chances and mistakes of history are allowed for, the answer must be: Communism makes some profound ap-

peal to the human mind.

Chambers went on to describe the ancient origins of what he called man’s “second oldest faith.” “Its promise,” he wrote,

was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: “Ye shall be as gods.” It is the great alternative faith of mankind. Like all great faiths, its force derives from a simple vision. Other ages have had great visions. They have always been different versions of the same vision: the vision of God and man’s relationship to God. The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God.

Chambers uncovered the spiritual roots of what was made manifest in one form as communism, in others as the hydra of radicalism that has haunted mankind since the expulsion from Eden, whether as the sexual obsessions of the libertines, feminists, and militant homosexuals; the growing power of Leviathan and bureaucracy; or the ruthlessness of globalist capitalism and self-absorbed consumerism. The rebellion is older than what we call modernity, or postmodern formlessness, but, in Chambers’ time as in our own, the rebellion against authority and the restrictions of traditional morality have been closely linked to modernization, the latest version

of which goes by the name globalization.

David Priestland reviews the history of what he calls the “Promethean” and “utopian” communist movement in *The Red Flag*. The book is engaging, but frustrating in its failure to elaborate a theme that remains an undercurrent: man’s desire to overturn the natural order, to steal the fire from Zeus. True, the author did not set out to write a testament like Chambers’. His is a political history of the communist movement as it attracts a following, becomes an apparently overwhelming force, and ultimately fails to deliver the utopia it promised. *The Red Flag* succeeds at this level, but the limits of Priestland’s treatment of the subject are related to his implied acceptance of most of the assumed values that Chambers and Solzhenitsyn rejected: egalitarianism, secularism, materialism, and what is best described as rebellion—a rejection of limits and of authority. While Priestland recoils from “utopian” and “dogmatic” ideologies, he, like both “liberals” and most “conservatives” in our time, accepts the rest.

Much of the book is devoted to struggles within the communist movement between what Priestland calls “modernist” or “technocratic” Marxism and a “romantic” current. It is a tension between the desire for material abundance (viewed by the modernist school as achievable only by industrialization, centralization, and bureaucratization) and utopian visions of a society unencumbered by hierarchy and distinctions between individuals and led by

the “vanguard party” on the way to perfect equality and self-realization. Thus, the conflict between the Stalinists and Maoists, between the cult of the Leader and the T-shirted, would-be Che Guevaras of 1968. Yet the two strains coexisted to one degree or another, even in Stalin’s Soviet Union, where the “Man of Steel” portrayed the transformation of society and Soviet modernization as an act of will. That romantic view, together with the conspiratorial origins of the party in Russia (a model followed across the globe), fueled the hunt for “enemies of the people,” “self criticism,” and re-education efforts under Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” and “Cultural Revolution” programs, as well as Pol Pot’s anti-industrialization onslaught in the killing fields of Cambodia. Transforming society and human nature required mass terror and social upheaval, whether the goal was modernization or communist anarchy.

ONE OF THE UNSETTLING elements of Priestland’s treatment of communist history is his reportorial style in dealing with mass terror. The reader gets some numbers (estimates of those who perished or were prisoners in communist gulags), but no sense of what the bizarre, hall-of-mirrors atmosphere was like in societies dominated by fanatical ideologues and murderous opportunists. For that, one must read Robert Conquest, or Solzhenitsyn, or Simon Sebag Montefiore’s *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. Again, the book’s aim is to present a political history of a movement, not a catalogue of horrors, but if those horrors are, as Chambers wrote, inherent in the movement, then Priestland’s treatment misses the elephant in the room.

Space limitations make it necessary to leave many of Priestland’s thought-provoking episodes and themes unmentioned, but there are two that cannot go without remark. First, Chambers’ comments on the appeal of communism were a reference to man’s fallen nature and the recurring hu-

man desire to remake reality. On that level, the movement attracted intellectuals, but Priestland’s book emphasizes the desire for modernization, nationalism, the heavy-handed rule of oligarchs, and the tensions in societies marked by wide gaps between races and ethnic groups and social and economic classes as factors that contributed a base of support for communist movements around the world. Priestland suggests that the encounter with modernity and its organizational, mobilizing, and technological superiority spurred many nationalists in developing countries to adopt Marxism as a vehicle for both bashing the technologically and materially superior Other (the West) and providing a communist blueprint for modernization. In this way, the “romantic” and internationalist Marxists could fly under the false flag of nationalism, rallying populations chafed by foreign domination and peasants who wanted their own land to the red banner. Most readers will be familiar with how communist regimes have used nationalism in times of crisis. The myth of the “Great Patriotic War” served to prop up a moribund Soviet regime for decades, as Priestland notes. So we have another answer to Chambers’ question, “Why did you become a Communist?” That the global East and South have in most cases not coped very well with the results of modernization gives those of us in the West and North something to consider; the collapse we see in many developing countries should prompt us to reflect on the social anomie that the same processes have unleashed upon us. In other words, we are not dealing all that successfully with modernity, even though we invented it. Perhaps there is something wrong with our assumptions.

Priestland also offers an interesting view of the rise of the neoconservatives, accompanied by a warning that the neoconservative-neoliberal messianic impulse is as utopian as communism. He connects the dots, ascribing the origins

of what became known as neoconservatism to the left. Priestland backs up to the 1940’s, the Trotskyite clash with the Stalinists, and Irving Kristol’s reading at Alcove No. 1 of New York City College to make this observation:

It may seem far-fetched to seek Marxist roots in neo-conservatism . . . but [neoconservatives] shared a number of Trotskyist attitudes: internationalism, a belief in struggle, the utopian notion of a moral society at the “end of history,” a hatred of Stalinist realpolitik, and most importantly, a Romantic belief in the power of ideas and morality to change the world.

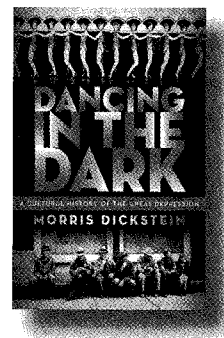
As Priestland asserts, the neoconservatives are the equivalent of the Romantic Marxists, while their counterparts, the technocratic-modernists of the political equation, are the neoliberal proponents of the market gospel. One side favors military mobilization to spread the gospel, the other what would be called “soft power”—promoting “human rights” and cultural penetration. The avatar of the new synthesis was Ronald Reagan, who, as Priestland says, adopted the “Marxist-inflected language” of the neoliberal-neoconservative synthesis and reflected its “revolutionary idealism.” It was Reagan who packaged his conservatism as a “revolution” that would “bring democracy to the world.”

Priestland warns that, if this new force learns nothing from the latest economic crisis, we may be faced with “another bloody act in the tragedy of Prometheus.” But many people on the right, having read this book, may ask themselves, “Did we really win the Cold War?”

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Chorus Lines

by Clark Stooksbury



Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression

by Morris Dickstein
New York: W.W. Norton
598 pp., \$29.95

THE CATASTROPHIC BURST of the housing bubble in the fall of 2008 shook the foundations of the world economy and instilled a fear of a new depression. Morris Dickstein notes with irony that he completed his cultural history of the Great Depression just as the country was entering a steep recession with parallels to the 1930's. In his hefty *Dancing in the Dark*, Dickstein probes the cultural landscape of the Depression era. He places heavy emphasis on fiction and film, but also devotes attention to photography, music, design, and architecture. The Great Depression "kindled America's social imagination, firing enormous interest in how ordinary people lived."

At a time of steep economic downturn, it is no surprise that poverty should be a topic covered in a variety of media, and *Dancing in the Dark* notes the importance of photographers in documenting it. Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White created iconic images that have helped to illustrate the Depression for later generations, and Dickstein has reproduced many well-known photographs throughout his text. Some of this work was done at the behest of the federal government; as Dickstein notes, because

government interventions in the

nation's economic life were controversial, the [Farm Security Administration] created the Photography Unit under Roy Stryker to build support for the New Deal policies by documenting the grim realities of the rural Depression.

Dickstein considers several novels of the era, giving special emphasis to Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*. Gold was a communist and an editor at *New Masses*; later, he worked as a columnist at the *Daily Worker*, where Dickstein describes him as having been "one of the most reliable and vituperative of Stalinist hatchet men." The novel, published in 1930, is set in the Jewish ghetto of turn-of-the-century New York and implies the author's conviction that "the whole rotten [social] structure needed to be torn down." Dickstein considers also John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which he characterizes as a road tale with didactic Popular Front elements. "When Tom figures out that if the pickers refuse to pick peaches, they will rot, Steinbeck is crafting a simple lesson in collective action and the power of the people." For this, Steinbeck was attacked by "politicians, newspapers, and business interests."

The Grapes of Wrath was brought to the big screen in a landmark 1940 film directed by John Ford that Dickstein credits with giving a "physical actuality and immediacy to the characters that Steinbeck himself could not fully provide." That criticism at-

tests to the power of movies, especially after the rise of talking pictures, which coincided roughly with the collapse of 1920's prosperity: Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, which pioneered sound, in 1927. In October 1930, *Film Daily* noted that "silents have reached the antique stage and are now approaching the curio era." That same year was a high point for film attendance: 80 million Americans went to the movies every week. Those numbers declined for a few years, but, at the low point of the Depression, tens of millions of Americans regularly dropped their nickels at the box office. Dickstein claims that, although the movie studios "were under tremendous economic pressure, with some teetering on the verge of bankruptcy, . . . somehow movies became a significant part of how the American people adapted to the Depression." It is natural, therefore, that *Dancing in the Dark* should devote substantial attention to the films of the Depression era.

Ignoring Shirley Temple's movies and Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind*, which sold millions of copies and inspired an epic film, Dickstein demonstrates a preference for the gangster films and backstage musicals of Warner Brothers, as well as the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers that were released by RKO. He seems especially enamored of the on-screen choreography of Busby Berkeley in four backstage musicals from the Warner studio released in 1933 and 1934, as the country was in transition from the Hoover