

Were the Communist Revolutions of Eastern Europe Genuine?

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2012

As our teller of tall tales, Winston Churchill, put it in his infamous 'iron curtain' speech of March, 1946:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities ... lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and are all subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence, but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow ... The Communist parties ... have been raised to preeminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control.

In other words, they were not 'genuine' communist uprisings, but coups sponsored by Moscow, after which communism was forced upon unwilling populations.

Like Churchill's 'history' of World War II, this account is somewhat gilded, more notable for its rhetoric than adherence to what was actually happening. It also provided the screen behind which former Nazis were given senior posts in Western Europe, since they were, after all, reliable anti-communists.

But let's look at a few statistics concerning communist party memberships across Europe to gain a sense of how popular the communists were:

Country	Pre-war membership	Post-war membership
Albania	1,000	12,000
Austria	16,000	132,000
Belgium	10,000	100,000
Bulgaria	8,000	427,000
Czechoslovakia	80,000	1,292,000
Denmark	2,000	60,000
Finland	1,000	25,000
France	340,000	1,000,000
Germany	300,000	805,000
Greece	n/a	100,000
Hungary	30,000	608,000
Italy	58,000	1,871,000
Netherlands	10,000	50,000
Norway	5,000	22,000
Poland	20,000	310,000
Romania	1,000	379,000
Spain	250,000	35,000
Sweden	11,000	48,000

UK	15,000	50,000
Yugoslavia	4,000	250,000

Apart from Spain, all communist parties across Europe made significant to phenomenal gains in membership, the highest being in Romania, with a 379% increase. Given that for every one person who joins a political party, ten more sympathise, these figures reflect a truly mass shift. It is also worth noting that the support was by no means restricted to Eastern Europe, for Italy and France experienced massive growth. Even the small Scandinavian countries saw significant rises in membership. This is far from a small cadre of crazed revolutionaries imposing their will on the masses.

Why? During times of severe and genuine crisis, communism typically gains mass support. The key, as Lenin tirelessly pointed out, is that the communist movement needs to be thoroughly organised and prepared for such situations. Of course, it helps if the Red Army is keeping order, but that, to my mind, is far preferable than the Americans or, in our time, NATO. To be added here is the fact that the Right, embodied by fascism, had been largely discredited in the popular mind after the war and that the most resolute opponent of fascism was communism. The result was an image of the communist as a straight-talking, trustworthy and resolute fighter for freedom. Even today in Russia and China, people tell me of a communist father or grandmother, who was precisely such a person: you knew where you stood; no mucking around; absolutely reliable.