



Stalin and Mao: A Comparison of the Russian and Chinese Revolutions by Lucien Bianco, trans. Krystyna Horko. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2018, 448 pp.

The world's descent into totalitarianism in the twentieth century is often associated with Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. In Europe in particular, thanks to French intellectuals, Soviet Russia and Maoist China were for a while seen in a more positive light. It took a lot of courage in the 1960s and 1970s to put forward the argument that communism (on the left) was in many ways at least as repressive as fascism (on the right). It took scholars such as Raymond Aron, Simon Leys (aka Pierre Ryckmans), as well as Lucien Bianco to set the record straight at a time when it was not popular and somewhat dangerous to do so.

On Maoist China, Bianco took a particular interest in the peasantry and its role in the 1949 revolution, publishing a work in 1967 that became a classic of sort titled *Les Origines de la révolution chinoise 1915-1949*. His later research remained focused on the same theme. It is thus very much *à propos* that Bianco should publish this latest work on two socialist revolutions that marked the twentieth century and were very influential throughout the world. The book under review summarizes Bianco's lifework and is likely to be his final and lasting contribution (he will turn 92 later this year).

Stalin and Mao contains nine tightly written chapters that are crammed with information based on Bianco's own research as well as that of an impressive list of scholars over the years (the bibliography alone is 28 pages long). While Bianco acknowledges that he relied on the work of other scholars for the Russian revolution, it in no way diminishes his comparison's value given his attention to detail.

For this short review, this reviewer will focus briefly on two chapters that are particularly relevant on the issue of socialist revolutions: bureaucracy and famines.

While Lenin was known for his animosity toward bureaucracy and China had a long tradition of protests against insensitive bureaucrats, both regimes saw a ballooning of the ranks of the civil service and party ranks. Virtually every field of state administration and economic management had to be supervised by a corresponding bureaucracy, not to mention the creation of a massive police force to secure the regime against real or imagined enemies. A major challenge for both regimes was how to reconcile the working-class identity of the bureaucracy with its need to have “experts” in management. As Max Weber warned as early as 1918, the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union became in fact the dictatorship of the official. In Mao’s China, the rise of a new class became more problematic. Mao was always suspicious of this group and occasionally used mass campaigns to destabilize it with cruel results.

Given its favorable (if formal) disposition toward the poor, it is ironic that both revolutions should have been behind the greatest man-made famines of the twentieth century, including, but not limited to, between six and seven million deaths in the Soviet Union (notably Kazakhstan and Ukraine) between 1931 and 1933 and between 20 and 40 million deaths in China between 1958 and 1962. Considering that these periods were free of war conditions or major natural disasters, the question it raises inevitably is what happened?

In the Soviet Union, forced collectivization of agriculture destabilized production among various groups of farmers, some of whom stood to lose in such an arrangement. Forced by an intransigent regime to join a *kolkhoz* (collective farm), many peasants took to passive resistance of one form or another. One collateral effect was a growing migration to the cities to escape what appeared to be planned impoverishment. Stalin responded by seizing grains that had allegedly been hoarded away by disgruntled farmers. When the peasant population tried to leave, notably in Ukraine, it was chased down and forced to return home, many dying along the way.

In China, collectivization in the form of the Commune system encountered less resistance but was undermined by an accelerated program of industrialization hampered by little planning, focusing on producing as much steel as possible, for instance, but largely useless because of its poor quality. As a result, rural areas faced labor shortages to collect the harvest.

Bianco recounts in vivid but painful details how the two socialist dictatorships went about molding their respective societies to fit their grandiose but seriously flawed program of industrial development, ignoring along the way the reality on the ground. If Mao tried at some level to avoid the errors committed by the earlier

Soviet model, he pursued his own program with as much determination with the same deadly results. While Bianco does not dwell at length on the power struggles going on inside these two regimes, he does hint at times at the madness that had to inhabit the minds of Mao and Stalin. Still, it becomes clear from Bianco's narrative that these two leaders also benefited from the complicity of cadres in the bureaucracy who could be the victims as much as the perpetrators of the violent repression that accompanied the enforcement of the economic program. If Stalin's approach resulted in grooming a new (upper) class, to use the title of Milovan Djilas' book, Mao was always adamant about curtailing the development of "bourgeois elements" within China, fighting it to his last breath.

Bianco benefited from the extensive research carried out over the past forty years by Western scholars as well as scholarship and personal accounts from within the Soviet Union and China. His distinct contribution is having had the ability and energy to collate and make sense of the extensive research carried out over the years in a single book. Not covered in this review but no less important are Bianco's treatment of the peasant question, culture, camps, and the conditions existing in Russia and China prior to their respective revolutions.

While socialism and communism as an ideology are largely discredited today, the mechanism (the Party) that allowed their executors to implement them can always re-emerge with a different veneer. Both in Russia and China, the major flaw of the political system was the concentration of power within the Communist party, itself beholden to a ruling circle (politburo) or founding father or its successor. The Party supervised all three branches of government (executive, legislative, judiciary), the latter being mere executors of orders from above. It should be noted that in the China of Xi Jinping, this relationship between the Party and these branches of government has not changed, leaving the country vulnerable to further abuses of power.

It is also noteworthy that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) holds obedience to the Party and not the government. In Western democracies, the military's relationship to the state and government is more complicated with many safeguards in place to avoid its being used to suit the caprices of a ruling class or the leader. Western militaries are trained to respect the constitutional foundations of the country and to answer to these rules alone. The existence of an independent judiciary guarantees such outcome. In the recent past, the United States has had occasion to test the effectiveness of its political structure in maintaining the independence of the various institutions and protecting it against any malevolent attempts to evade it. As events surrounding the 6 January 2021 incident at the US Capitol indicate, the "system worked." After radical elements had stormed the Capitol in an apparent attempt to subvert the political process, General Mark A.

Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reminded his troops that “as we have done throughout our history, the US military will obey lawful orders from civilian leadership, support civilian authorities to protect lives and property, ensure public safety in accordance with the law, and remain fully committed to protecting and defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

These events are a reminder that beyond the democratic political order set in place and in existence for many generations, it is not the institutions themselves that guarantee its survival as much as the popular will to safeguard it.

Richard Desjardins

Mr. Desjardins is a retired Canadian civil servant. He holds an MA in political science.