

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Silvio Pons, Robert Service, eds. *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 944 pp. \$99.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13585-4.

Reviewed by Padraic Kenney (Indiana University)

Published on HABSBUURG (January, 2011)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan



A New ABC of Communism

Do we need a comprehensive reference work on Communism? Surely we do: perhaps for any scholar over forty (or so), the Communist system and its features are generally familiar. For the rest, it is a world that no longer exists, as distant and exotic as the Ottoman Empire. And even for those who still remember it well, a guide to that world will come in handy.

The *Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism* goes some way toward filling this need. Editors Silvio Pons and Robert Service convinced a great many experts, among the best-known scholars in the field, to write essays on everything from the “Atomic Bomb” (by David Holloway) to “Zhdanovism” (by Elena Zubkova). All the major names and events are covered, and an impressive variety of concepts or objects receive serious attention, too. I will confess, for example, that I did not even know one could write about “Americanism,” as Federico Romero does; “Borders,” in turn, is an excellent example of a topic that, while not obvious, turns out to offer valuable insight into the workings of Communist states and international affairs. This is precisely what an encyclopedia should do. The reader or reviewer, leafing through it, should feel that nothing essential is left out but that there is still much to learn. More than four hundred entries over nine hundred pages should satisfy anyone who consults this dictionary.

There are a few odd biases in this collection of essays, however. Each is worth some attention. First, while the ideological and political aspects of twentieth-century

Communism are covered fully—the sheer number of -isms associated with Communist doctrine and with the internal struggles in the Soviet camp never ceases to amaze—the social experience of Communism remains underexamined. There is no entry on gender (though Anna di Biaggio does supply entries on the “Women, Emancipation of” and on family), nor on masculinity or sexuality. Each of these are central to understanding Communism; the literature on each is substantial enough that citations here would be superfluous. Another absence is an entry that would reflect recent debates on self and subjectivity. This represents a real missed opportunity to engage a central question about Communism: to what extent did people adopt the ways of thinking encouraged by the regimes, incorporating them into their senses of self? Another way to have approached this would have been through an entry on everyday resistance or simply resistance. While some opposition movements have their own entries (actually just two, “Solidarity” and “Charter 77,” plus a general entry on “Dissent in the USSR”), the question of resistance is one about the success of Communist states in assimilating their citizens to acceptance (whether eager or reluctant) of the Communist project. Entries for strikes, boycotts, food riots, and a host of other kinds of opposition would also have been possible. Most surprising is the lack of entries for universities, schools, students, or education. For that matter (thinking of the title of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s 1979 book), there is no entry for social mobility. Is this not central to the building of Communist societies? And finally, an essay on the aesthetics of Communism would have been

welcome. Taken together, these gaps tell us a great deal about the way that the editors have conceptualized Communism. Their version is somewhat static, and concentrated among the elites. It is not so much a dictionary of Communism as it is a guide to Communist rule.

Tangential to this set of concerns, the treatment of Communism itself as an ideology falls somewhat short. There is no entry for Socialism, nor for Anarchism or Syndicalism. Here, though, a perfectly defensible decision seems to have been made. On the one hand, while the relationship between Communism and its sister ideologies or movements would have been useful to explore, a decision to stick more or less to the actually existing system makes sense. On the other hand, one of the questions students in classes on the Communist era ask most often is about the difference between Communism and Socialism. The editors miss a chance to help the uninitiated understand the Communist system from this angle.

A second bias, and much more damaging, unfortunately, is Soviet. Many topics neglect anything but the Soviet version of Communism. Thus, as noted above, there is an entry for “Dissent in the USSR,” but not for dissent anywhere else. We have “Peasants in the USSR,” but peasants nowhere else (though Lynne Viola’s entry on collectivization does cover the rest of the bloc); “Dissolution of the USSR,” but not the breakup of Yugoslavia (nor Slobodan Milošević); “Cinema, Soviet,” and “Television in the Soviet Era,” and “Literature in Soviet Russia,” but no other cultural entries (theater? music?) nor reference to any other Communist states. We have “Orthodox Church, Russian,” but no other Orthodox churches, and nothing on the Lutheran Church (there is an entry for “Catholic Church”). The entries for “Socialist Consumer Society,” “Economic Reform,” “Intelligentsia,” “Emancipation of Women,” “Press,” and “Public Opinion” each deal exclusively (or nearly so) with the Soviet example. Several of these would look radically different if Eastern Europe were included. Economic reform in Eastern Europe is discussed, briefly, in the entry on the “Socialist Market Economy,” at least. But in so many essays, the East European example—and sometimes the Chinese, or other examples—is an afterthought. Most of the time, the Soviet experience should be foregrounded, as constitutive of the

entire bloc. Many of the entries I have just listed, though, would look quite different if viewed from the Western edge of that bloc. The task of the editors, then, should have been to think about whether the Soviet experience is therefore truly representative. So to narrow down the volume’s scope still further, it is, in the main, a Dictionary of Soviet Communist Rule.

A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism also bears the imprint of its Italian origins. This shows up to some extent in the choice of entries: there is one, for example, on Giorgio Amendola, who is described throughout the essay as merely “emblematic” and “one of the protagonists” of various trends or events (pp. 5-6). Was he more significant to Communism than Jakub Berman or Julius Fučík, Ota Šik or Ernő Gerő? More seriously, the editors and publishers should be faulted for not ensuring that the bibliographies for each entry would be of use to the English-language reader. The bibliography for “Solidarity” is one of the longer ones in the dictionary, and one of the weakest. Of the nine entries in the bibliography, five are in Italian. There is one minor work in Polish, and three in English. Only one of these nine (that by Alain Touraine, François Dubet, Michel Wieviorka, and Jan Strzelecki) would make a top-twenty bibliography on the topic. Readers will easily find other examples of lazy editing and useless bibliographies.

A reference work like this one is the product of choices, as much as is a monograph. The reviewer, unable to tussle with a main argument or with source interpretations as in a typical review, must resort to pointing out omissions and biases. With the exception of the Italian angle, the gaps or decisions discussed here do not weaken the dictionary, but simply add up to a particular perspective. The Soviet-dominated focus on high politics and ideology is not entirely inappropriate, though it does mean that this dictionary does not deliver what it promises. While this may not make the ideal Christmas present (though Ded Moroz might be persuaded to stick one in his sack for you), the high quality of the prose, the distinguished community of authors, and the imaginative variety of topics covered will make this a worthwhile reference.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Padraic Kenney. Review of Pons, Silvio; Service, Robert, eds., *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30700>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.