

**Theory & Criticism 9687 - Twentieth Century Communist Theories of Revolution and
State-Building
Fall 2026
Professor: Oleksa Drachewych**

Course Description:

Marxism-Leninism remains a prominent feature of many “communist” regimes and parties today and has influenced a worldwide movement, and a variety of spin-off ideologies. Yet, the term Marxism- Leninism in the Soviet context reflects a specific brand of “communism.” The term often reflects the doctrine Joseph Stalin developed following Lenin’s death in 1924. Here, he lionized Lenin’s theoretical and political contributions, tied them explicitly to Marxism, and sought to add himself into the canon of Marxist figures, enhancing his legitimacy in the eyes of the Bolshevik party and international communist movement.

Leninism represents the corpus of ideas that came from the writings of V.I. Lenin. Influenced by Marxism, social democracy, and the Russian radical tradition, he called for a vanguard party, promoted the dictatorship of the proletariat, and expanded his corpus of ideas to try and revive revolutionary Marxism during the First World War, developing a theory of imperialism, of self- determination, and of how Marxism could apply to the Russian imperial context. Upon the Bolsheviks coming to power, Lenin’s theoretical approaches were tested by the practical realities of trying to govern in the former Russian Empire and the need to consolidate revolutionary gains. As a result, many of Lenin’s theories evolved to reflect these realities; historians have reconsidered Lenin’s theories in light of the practical decisions the Bolsheviks made. Following Lenin’s death, although Stalin sought to link his leadership and ideas to Lenin, historians, and theorists, disagree to what extent Stalinism was an extension of Leninism or if it was something different. Regardless, these ideas that came out of the Soviet Union took on new significance in a fight for global revolution and, often, these theories were reimagined or reconsidered in a variety of local contexts. The result is multiple forms of communism inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, yet sometimes taking different approaches in different regions in the world, leading to a variety of “camps” in the Communist tradition. These approaches then had practical impact through decolonization and the Cold War, and communist theories influenced the development and political structure of many nations in the Global South. At the same time, communist parties produced regimes of significant oppression and terror, leading to questions about whether the theories themselves inherently lead to authoritarianism and mass murder. Some scholars use the term “state socialism” to describe nations like the Soviet Union, arguing that communism as an ideology was subsumed by the ruling party’s thirst for power. Today, the term “communism” provokes notable response in our political climate.

This class aims to introduce students to a deeper reading of the writings and theory of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and other prominent communist thinkers around the world and to

consider them on their own, in context, and, where relevant, implemented into actual policy. What was Leninism? How did it evolve through the words of different theorists in different parts of the world? What alternatives did communism claim to offer to European capitalism? Why did people become communists? To what extent can we speak of a global “Communist” movement, and to what extent do different regional and local realities lead to new understandings? How did the realities of needing to consolidate power change theory? Did these realities inform the broader ideology, or did practical considerations drive ideological evolution (or devolution)? Should Lenin or Stalin be deemed linked ideologically and theoretically, or are they their own distinct theoretical approaches? To what extent did Stalinism also lead to new evolutions internationally? What is the Communist state? What is a Communist nation? How is the proletariat understood, especially after Lenin’s interventions? Was terror or violence part of the theories themselves, a result of revolutionary circumstances, or a totalitarian thirst for power? This course will explore the myriad of theories that are understood to be “communist” while emphasizing their role in defining how communist regimes or influenced parties built their states and staged revolutions. Regardless of what one thinks of communism as an ideology or a group of theories, its impact on the 20th century and beyond cannot be ignored.

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in Theory & Criticism, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student’s home program.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this class, students will:

- Read, analyze, and critique prominent theories in the Marxist-Leninism tradition both as theories and as political documents that then, sometimes, were later implemented
- Understand how context influences the development of these theories and how these theories change upon many of these theorists gaining political power
- Understand how and why these theories remain debated as political theories, historical theories, revolutionary theories, and more
- Understand how communism can be seen as an ideology of liberation or utopia to some, yet one of oppression and violence to others
- Understand the transnational impacts of these theories and how they evolved and adapted to new regions over time and across space
- Engage in discussion with one’s peers in understanding, analyzing, and interpreting these theories
- Write an article length paper reviewing relevant theories in context

Marking Breakdown:

Participation – 35%

Class Facilitation – 15%

Research or Theoretical Paper – 50%

Participation: Students will be expected to arrive in class, having completed the assigned readings, and prepared to discuss their content in class. Participation will be taken teleologically – it includes reactions to the readings, questions about the readings, interactions with fellow classmates and more.

Some of these discussions may lead to periods where passions run high. As a result, at all times, students will be expected to comport themselves professionally and cordially, with respect for their fellow students and with the aim of intellectually engaging with the ideas that make up the corpus of works in this theoretical tradition and understanding their arguments and claims, even if we may disagree with parts or all of them.

Class Facilitation: Students will sign up in the first week of class to guide class discussion on their own or in pairs (depending on class size). Those responsible for facilitation will need to read additional secondary readings (listed as “Additional Readings” on the syllabus) to help augment their facilitation. They will then be expected to integrate those readings into their facilitation, informing the questions they ask and discussion they lead during class. I am not expecting a presentation, outside of a short few minute introduction to frame the start of discussion should the student desire to do so.

Research or Theoretical Paper: Students can choose to write a 20-25 page (12 point font, double-spaced) research or theoretical paper on a prominent work or topic in “Communism” in the 20th Century. If students choose to write a **research paper**, they will be expected to choose a given theoretical work or school of theories and discuss its impact, either on the development of later theory or its implementation in a communist nation (should the theorist come to a position of power or the work inform the development of a later communist nation). Students could also consider how the theory was framed and how implementation or reconsideration by others reflect on the original theory. Alternately, students could write a more **theoretical paper**; here, they will be expected to engage in the broad historiography of analysis that tries to explain these theories while developing their own analysis of what they feel is the appropriate understanding of the theoretical work they choose. This paper will be due on the date of the final class, December 8.

Course Readings:

All of the readings assigned are available in hardcopy or digitally through Weldon libraries or through other online resources. All readings will be linked on Brightspace to guide students where to find an appropriate copy. Additional reading or substitutions in readings may be suggested during the term and as a result of discussion with students.

Course Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction/What is “Communism?”

- Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Doubleday, 2009), 101-114.
- Ronald Grigor Suny, *Red Flag Wounded: Stalinism and the Fate of the Soviet Experiment* (Verso, 2020), Introduction.
- Brigitte Studer, “Communism as Existential Choice,” in Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Communism: Volume I: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917-1941* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 503-525.
- Lars T. Lih, “The Soviet Union and the Path to Communism,” in *What was Bolshevism?* (Brill, 2024), 43-68.

For this class, we will have a short discussion to think about what questions will animate our discussions in this class. The above readings will only be limitedly discussed this week, but are done to offer some provocative starting points, and will be returned to in the final week of the course.

Week 2: Leninism: State and Revolution

- V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*
- Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of Communist Utopia* (Stanford University Press, 1995), 322-346

Week 3: Imperialism and Self-Determination of Nations in the Leninist Tradition

- V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, excerpts
- V.I. Lenin, *On the Self-Determination of Nations*, excerpts
- Rosa Luxemburg, *The National Question*, excerpts

Additional Readings:

- Richard B. Day & Daniel Gaido, *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Brill, 2012), 1-91.

Week 4: The ABC of Communism

- Nikolai Bukharin & Evgeny Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, excerpts
- Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolshevik’s Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in the Early Soviet Years,” *Slavic Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter, 1988): 599-613; and the response by Ronald Grigor Suny, “Class and State in the Early Soviet Period: A Reply to Sheila Fitzpatrick,” *Slavic Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter, 1988): 614-619.

Additional Readings:

- Lars T. Lih, “The Mystery of the ABC,” *Slavic Review* 56, no. 1 (1997): 50-72.
- Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 123-159.

Week5: No class – READING WEEK

Week 6: Stalinism and “the National Question”

- Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, excerpts.
- Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2001).

Additional Readings:

- Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 1-98.

Week 7: Interwar International Communism and the “National and Colonial Questions”

- S.A. Smith, “The Russian Revolution, Nationalism Self-Determination, and Anti-Imperialism, 1917-1927,” in *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions*, edited by Oleksa Drachewych & Ian McKay (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 73-98.
- Lenin & M.N. Roy and the discussions around “Theses on the National and Colonial Question,” 1920
- Discussions on the Native Republic Thesis, 1928
- Jose Carlos Mariategui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, “The Problem of the Indian,” and “The Problem of Land.”

Additional Readings:

- Read the introduction and any two additional chapters (beyond the Smith chapter above) from Oleksa Drachewych & Ian McKay, eds., *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).

Week 8: The Stalinist Revolution

All read:

- Lev Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, excerpts.

Then read two of the following:

- Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (University of California Press, 1995), 1-25 & 198-237.
- Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament,” *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 2 (2014): 167-192.
- Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 1-14 & 53-114
- Igal Halfin, *Terror in my Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-42 & 96-147.
- Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-39 & 67-88.

- Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front* (Cornell University Press, 1992), 1-15 & 115-148.

Week 9: The Short Course

- David Brandenberger and Mikhael V. Zelenov eds., *Stalin's Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* (Yale University Press, 2019).

Week 10: Chinese Communism and Soviet Influences

- Mao Zedong et al, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, 1939
- Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy*, 1940
- Hua-yu Li, "Instilling Stalinism in Chinese Party Members: Absorbing Stalin's Short Course in the 1950s," in Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li (eds.), *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present* (Lexington books, 2010), 107-130.

Additional Readings:

- Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong Thought*, edited by Gregor Benton (Brill, 2020), 66-87 & 231-265.

Week 12: Maoism and the Little Red Book

- *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* ("The Little Red Book")
- Alexander C. Cook (ed.), *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Additional Readings:

- Jiang Yihua and Roderich MacFarquhar, "Two Perspectives on Mao Zedong," in Timothy Cheek (ed), *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 332-352

Week 13: Communism and Africa

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, excerpts
- Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, excerpts
- The Arusha Declaration
- George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*, excerpts

Additional Readings:

- Jeremy Friedman, *Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 1-17 & 124-166.

Week 14: Communist Internationalism

- Lin Cuhn, 'China's lost world of Internationalism,' in Ben Wang (ed.), *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Duke University Press, 2017), 177-211.

- David Brandenberger, "Global and Transnational in Form, Soviet in Content: The Changing Semantics of Internationalism in Official Soviet Discourse, 1917-1991," *Russian Review* 80, no. 4 (2021): 562-580.
- Pierre Asselin, "Fueling the World Revolution: Vietnamese Communist Internationalism, 1954-1975," in R. Joseph Parrott and Mark Atwood Lawrence (eds.), *The Tricontinental Revolution: Third World Radicalism and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 113-138.
- Salar Mohandesi, *Red Internationalism: Anti-Imperialism and Human Rights in the Global Sixties and Seventies* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 48-79.

Additional Readings:

- Reread and reconsider the readings assigned for Introductory week

Additional Statements:

Statement on Academic Offences:

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the [Scholastic Offences policy](#), specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence.

Communication policies:

Students are welcome to come to the professor's office hours or to arrange another time to meet the professor at his office if they have questions or concerns about the course. Additionally, they may contact the professor via email. The professor will aim to respond to students within 24 hours on weekdays and within 48 hours on weekends. Please use your UWO email address for any correspondence.

Use of electronic devices:

Students are welcome to use electronic devices for the purposes of writing notes or reviewing course materials during class. Recording tools are not allowed without written permission from the instructor.

Use of generative AI tools:

You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course. Any use of such tools for assignments in this course may be considered a form of academic misconduct.

Health/Wellness Services:

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to [Mental Health Support](#) at Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Accessible Education (AE):

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education (AE), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AE and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations may include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the [Wellness and Wellbeing website](#). To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.