

McAdams, A. James. *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

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What was the Communist Party? This deceptively complex question is the guiding point of A. James McAdams' new book. Many great works have been written on the subject of the ideological and philosophical history of communism, as well as the histories of various individual communist parties. Yet surprisingly little has been written on the history of the internal functioning of communist parties in a comparative framework. For too long it has been assumed that the Communist Party was a monolith and that to understand communist ideology was to understand the party, regardless of the local context. McAdams has done a great service by dispelling this old historiographical prejudice.

McAdams argues that the Communist Party as an idea is an inherently schizophrenic one, caught between the ideologies of revolutionary leadership and historical inevitability. On the one hand, if history moves inevitably in stages towards communism, why the need for a party? On the other hand, how will history move forward towards communism if workers do not become class conscious? The theoretical dilemma pivots on the question of whether or not workers can become class conscious on their own. McAdams holds that this dilemma is the origin point of the Communist Party. Composed of those

who have the correct understanding of the development of history, its stated task is to lead the workers and induce their class consciousness, speeding up what is also held to be an inevitable process, hence becoming the vanguard of the revolution. This leads to a centralization of power however, for if the party is composed of those who have a correct understanding of history, the party can never be wrong, and thus whoever leads the party has the ultimate understanding.

McAdams then sees the history of the Communist Party in all its iterations across the globe as a conflict between centralization of power within the party leadership and the party's stated desire to develop a society in which the mass of workers will have ultimate power. McAdams sees this conflict as leading to the rise of dictatorial power in almost every Communist Party. Marxists centralized power under one leader that claimed to have the ultimate understanding of history and did it all under the stated goal that this centralization would lead to the final implementation of policy to perversely create the decentralized communist society. This schizophrenic dynamic, however, made the Communist Party weak at its heart. The Party's centralization of power led to succession crises after the death of a Party leader and also made the Party unresponsive outside of military force against popular discontent. The Party, far from its stated and truly believed aims of creating a free and just society, created a new and perhaps even more pernicious dictatorship than the empires that it helped to topple.

McAdams provides a persuasive analysis to understanding the inner political workings of the Communist Party throughout its history from Marx to Gorbachev. His emphasis on comparing party dynamics moves the historical discussion from the esotericism of pure ideology to a better understanding of how and why communist parties made the decisions that they did. McAdams is particularly insightful about the Chinese Communist Party and Mao's motivations for his policies and conflicts with his party leadership. I am confident that this work will become a standard reference in the future for students and scholars of communism. It should be emphasized that this is not a work of primary or original research but rather a creative and exhaustive synthesis of prior research and document collections. McAdams draws on a wide range of secondary sources and his bibliography doubles as an insightful overview of the historiography of communism in English. His source work is not unique in its material but in the way that he synthesizes them. McAdams has extracted new insights from older works, going beyond the surface to reveal inner workings. His book will be useful to students as an introduction to the history and nature of the Communist Party as well as to established scholars and researchers as a reference work and benchmark of current scholarship.