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Edited by Mark R. Beissinger And Stephen Kotkin

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## The Historical Legacies of Communism: An Empirical Agenda

Stephen Kotkin and Mark R. Beissinger

Writing in the early 1990s, social scientist Ken Jowitt famously argued that “whatever the results of the current turmoil in Eastern Europe, one thing is clear: the new institutional patterns will be shaped by the ‘inheritance’ and legacy of forty years of Leninist rule” (Jowitt 1992, 285). Many would now agree. And yet, over the past two decades, the pace of change within most post-communist societies has been tremendous, leading some to wonder whether the notions of “postcommunist” or “post-Soviet” retain any substance at all (Humphrey 2002). Property has been redistributed, societies have been opened to the world, and open political competition to varying degrees has been introduced. Many of the postcommunist states – including three that were once part of the Soviet Union – have joined the European Union and NATO. As Russian journalist Masha Lipman noted a decade after Jowitt made his observation, “In just over a decade as independent states, the various former Soviet republics have gone their separate ways so fast and so far that it’s hard to believe they were once parts of the same empire” (Lipman 2003).

Here we have a genuine (and largely unacknowledged) puzzle within the study of the former communist countries: As the world approaches the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 2014), has communism been largely transcended, or do communist legacies remain operative? Such a question may seem surprising to some. But that the historical experience of communism continues to act as a powerful undercurrent shaping the long-term trajectories of postcommunist development is not an assumption to be taken for granted. If it does continue to affect postcommunist development, in what ways does it do so specifically, and can such assertions be demonstrated with any degree of confidence? Perhaps trajectories have been shaped instead by fundamental divergences produced after communism, or even by precommunist historical developments. More fundamentally, what is a historical legacy, and how should it be identified? How do we actually know when

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historical legacies are at work? And what would we need to know to falsify such assertions? In short, can legacy arguments, like that Jowitt posited two decades ago, be specified and tested in any rigorous way? And what major lessons do variations in the transcendence or reproduction of practices and institutions from the communist era hold for social scientific understanding and for public policy?

Answers to many of these questions would seem to depend to an uncanny degree on geography. If someone fell asleep during the 1970s in, say, Minsk, Moscow, or Tashkent and suddenly awoke today, what would they think? That person would not know the details of the Soviet collapse or of the so-called reforms of the 1990s (let alone the vast literature purporting to explain what happened). But they would know a great deal about Brezhnev-era political machines across Soviet Eurasia. Would the broader picture of governance across Eurasia today come as a complete shock, or would it seem eerily familiar? If one took Brezhnev-era machines, added some multi-candidate elections and legalized private property, then shook very hard, what would come out? Conversely, anyone who fell asleep during the 1970s and awoke today in, say, Tallinn, Warsaw, or Prague might well be thoroughly astonished by what they saw.

In fact, most analysts draw a sharp line between the twelve former union republics of the Soviet Union whose incorporation into the USSR was internationally recognized, on the one hand, and the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, on the other. But how great are the differences across these two sets of cases, and what accounts for them? Are there realms of activity in which a communist legacy has persisted irrespective of geographic location? Why have some aspects of the communist experience been shed more easily than others have? And what is it, anyway, that geography represents – the impact of precommunist historical experiences? The influence of different versions of communism? Critical decisions made by leaders or different forms and degrees of external influence in the wake of communism's demise? In fact, arguments have been made on behalf of each of these interpretations. What were the relative impacts of domestic processes versus the effects of neighborhood and diffusion? Were democratization efforts by outsiders consequential (helpful, harmful) or inconsequential? Was European Union accession decisive, as some claim? To what extent did EU influence, when it did occur, depend on the presence of conditions laid down before or during communism for its effects? And was deepened globalization a cause as well as an outcome of the differentiated paths of development in the wake of communism? In short, any argument about the historical legacies of communism raises broader questions about the main linkages explaining convergent and divergent patterns of postcommunist development.

The fundamental idea underlying this volume is to confront empirically the historical legacy arguments that have now become commonplace in the study of former communist countries. The very definition of postcommunism

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as a political and social phenomenon implies the continued presence of distinctive communist legacies – at least in some critical realms of activity – without which the postcommunist moniker would otherwise be meaningless. Certainly, for many analysts of the Eurasian and Eastern European regions, communism continues to be understood as a defining historical experience, much like colonialism was for much of the developing world.<sup>1</sup> Like colonialism, Soviet-style systems involved a fundamental reordering of political, legal, economic, and social relations and are often said to have produced certain cultural attitudes and ways of behaving that have proven difficult to change. But this most certainly is not uniformly so. Moreover, as with colonialism, one might expect the influence of the communist experience to decay gradually over time in many areas, as new factors and experiences arise that shape developmental trajectories. Now, more than two decades after the collapse, it seems natural to ask what has been the long-term impact of communism on political, social, and economic development of the formerly communist states.

Our approach has been to define clearly notions of historical legacies and to ask a group of knowledgeable experts in particular spheres of activity to subject claims of legacies to rigorous examination. We do not seek to assert a *comprehensive* framework for explaining how past legacies cause present institutions and practices in the postcommunist world (and beyond). That is because, at this stage, we do not think a comprehensive framework is needed (let alone possible on the basis of current research). On the contrary, this volume urges that historical legacies be thought about empirically, contextually, and with greater rigor. The lack of a comprehensive approach to the subject, therefore, amounts to a conscious methodological choice, reflecting an understanding of how the study of historical legacies should be approached (rigor over comprehensiveness, at least until we know more). Thus, we seek to understand why, given patterns of late communism, certain institutional forms, ways of thinking, and modes of behavior appear to have persisted more than two decades after the demise of communism, finding new purpose, while others have fallen by the wayside. We seek to understand why this occurred in some contexts and not in others. We also aim to focus some attention on the variable formation of communist legacies in realms that have at times received less attention in the scholarly literature but that nevertheless remain critical to an understanding of the politics of the region (for instance, state institutions, property redistribution, law, and the global context).

In this introduction, we lay out some of the fundamental issues that subsequent chapters pursue in more depth, provide common definitions, and offer some guidelines for how we believe the study of historical legacies should be approached – steps that we believe could be just as easily used for understanding historical legacies in other parts of the world or involving other historical eras.<sup>2</sup> As will be evident, demonstrating the salience of historical legacies proves considerably harder than it looks.

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### Replacing Transitions with Legacies?

For many years after the collapse of communism, scholars of postcommunist politics highlighted “transitions” from communism (especially in the realm of institutional change) rather than manifest persistence in politics and economics. But by the late 1990s, it had become evident that the transition model had run its course, even among most of its proponents (Carothers 2002). At this time, many scholars began to rediscover deeper historical patterns that were thought to have shaped developmental trajectories. This in turn led to the emergence of an enormous variety of legacy arguments, particularly among political scientists. Occasionally there have been attempts to connect these social science appeals to the work of historians and vice versa, but that dialogue remains highly underdeveloped.<sup>3</sup>

Uses of the concept of legacy have been broad and varied. One study, for instance, pinpointed several “models” of communist rule that defined the nature of center-periphery interactions in the non-Russian republics in the aftermath of communism: a “most-favored-lord” model pushing gradual assimilation; a colonial model, uprooting local society but establishing barriers to full assimilation; an integral model, in which local society was ruled over but retained a strong sense of autonomy and cohesion vis-à-vis metropolitan authority (Laitin 1998). Other studies reminded us that the various outcomes of postcommunist party systems in Eastern Europe did not emerge from a tabula rasa, but were influenced by the variety of forms of state-society relationships that had already materialized under communism (or in some accounts, immediately prior to the onset of communism) (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Grzymala-Busse 2002; Wittenberg 2006). Inevitably, scholars pushed legacy arguments back still further in time, arguing that the timing of literacy’s arrival in Eastern Europe and Eurasia (whether it occurred prior to or under communism) functioned as the critical juncture determining patterns of postcommunist political and institutional development (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006). Thus, on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet collapse, a growing social science literature had formed around legacy arguments, provoking questions about the meaning of legacy itself.<sup>4</sup>

Taking this shift to legacy approaches as our point of departure, we invited a group of scholars of the contemporary postcommunist world with a historical bent to reexamine what we think we know about postcommunist political development and to think broadly and unsentimentally about the historical legacies of communism. We developed a framing paper that provided them with a common set of definitions and questions and that laid out a common framework for analyzing historical legacies. The group met twice – once in advance of writing their papers to define an agenda for the papers and to discuss the framing concepts, and a second time to discuss in detail the first drafts of the papers that they had prepared. Our interest in putting together this project was not only in elaborating a better understanding of what one means by

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a historical legacy, but also to encourage scholars to engage empirically with how one might prove or disprove a legacy's existence and what kinds of argumentation and evidence would be necessary to demonstrate or undermine a legacy argument convincingly. We believe such an exercise is necessary because legacy arguments can be, and have been, easily abused, both by their practitioners and their detractors (for critiques, see Kopstein 2003; Pop-Eleches 2007; LaPorte and Lussier 2011).

Legacy arguments have often been made at a high level of generality, sometimes assume that correlation or similarity is sufficient evidence of a legacy, and frequently fail to trace the actual mechanisms connecting past and present that are implied within them. Tellingly, legacy studies often contradict one another, raising the issue of how one should sort out the validity of their various claims. It may seem obvious that the past conditions the present and always lies embedded within it. It is just as obvious that the present is not the past, and that one never steps in the same river twice. But how does one think about the deeper structural connections between past and present without trivializing the enormous ruptures with the past that have occurred? Rather than simply substituting "legacy" for "transition," we seek to turn the discussion toward a deeper understanding of what constitutes a legacy and of the particular logics and mechanisms that would allow us to give substance to an otherwise mercurial concept.

We also encouraged our authors to draw attention to a number of areas for which we believe the connections between the communist past and the postcommunist present deserve better specification. For example, attention to the executive branch within the literature on postcommunist societies since 1991 has not kept pace with the study of postcommunist voting patterns and public opinion, as scholars have taken advantage of new opportunities to apply survey techniques in postcommunist countries while access to information about government bureaucracies often remained difficult.<sup>5</sup> While ample attention has been paid to the choice of economic reform strategies in the 1990s, far fewer people studied long-term patterns of investment and employment or the implications of inherited economic infrastructure that might shape postcommunist political and economic development (and vice versa).<sup>6</sup> Scholars have analyzed extensively the massive redistribution of property that followed the end of communism (Frye 2000; Volkov 2002; Verdery 2003; Dunn 2004; Hedlund 2005; Ledeneva 2006; Allina-Pisano 2008). But the extent to which these patterns of postcommunist political economy remain connected to the past or have instead been shaped by new dynamics remains uncertain. There are also excellent studies of the transformation of postcommunist judiciaries and court systems (Solomon 1995; Hendley 1999; Trochev 2008), but the linkages between the trajectories of the courts and what was inherited from the past are not always clearly specified. While the social ramifications that flowed from the upheaval of communist collapse have been studied in great detail (Shlapentokh 1996; Webber 2000; Humphrey 2002; Taylor 2003), the role of

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the outside world has often remained a blank spot or has been reduced to a focus on democracy promotion efforts. Relatively few scholars, for instance, have examined how postcommunist societies have been shaped (or not shaped) by globalization and the world economy: the impact of world energy markets, foreign investment, trade, global cultural currents, or the role of possible models for emulation (for exceptions, see Segbers 2001; Wallander 2007; Pickles and Jenkins 2008).

It bears keeping in mind that any social science recourse to history must also take into account specific historical junctures. To take one example, a variety of explanations have been put forward to explain economic success, often taking Britain and the European continent as key case studies, but the post-World War II East Asia development story unfolded at a time when the United States was the global economic power and championed an open global economy – a situation that did not exist when the first industrial revolution occurred. Communism collapsed during a specific historical moment, a time of pronounced ascendancy of markets over the public sphere, a trend that the collapse itself epitomized. But perhaps more consequentially, even before communism was collapsing in Europe and Eurasia, East Asia was fast becoming a global manufacturing base that competed with anything the bloc could produce or might hope to produce. At the same time, the American market was largely closed to the former Soviet countries. Such a specific globalization conjuncture may have profoundly shaped the possibilities and limits for how the turn away from central planning unfolded.

We believe that in examining linkages between the past and present there is also a need to move beyond the self-imposed normative boundaries that have at times limited inquiry about the postcommunist region. In much of the literature on the legacies of communism, legacies are understood largely as burdens from the past – bloated bureaucracies, alienation from politics and parties, social distrust – a kind of negative inheritance marshaled to explain the disappointing outcomes of transition (Volgyes 1995). We are not concerned with this kind of liabilities and (more rarely) assets approach to the past, or what David Lane has felicitously called the “footprint” of Sovietism as a limit on change (Lane 2011, 3). Lane and his co-contributors largely treat legacies as a fetter on the transition to markets, law, and pluralism, although they credit some countries (Poland, Hungary) with “traditions” that facilitated transition to a Western model. Nor are we fundamentally concerned with what is broadly called “political culture,” which Stephen White refers to in the postcommunist context as “the revenge of the superstructure” (traditions of collectivism, patriotism, and social justice versus shallow roots of a liberal order) (White 2011, 65). We encouraged our authors not to measure developments by holistic yardsticks or by some abstract conception of what kind of societies these places *should* have become, but by what kinds of relationships they actually have. We asked them, for instance, to pay attention to such questions as who owns property, how can there be private property in the absence of the rule of

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law, how do these patterns and outcomes relate or do not relate to what was inherited from late communism, and so on. We asked them not to focus on how these places ought to be governed – as the transitions literature sometimes suggested – but how they are actually governed and how this might or might not be concretely related to the communist past.

Finally, let us underscore that the editors of this volume are agnostic about the significance of the communist experience for former communist countries. In designing this project, we fully expected to find considerable variation in the extent to which the communist experience continues to matter, whether across particular countries (and within them) or across particular spheres of activity (and within them).<sup>7</sup> Legacies, if they exist, might not include all parts of the former communist bloc or even all parts of the Soviet Union. The communist experience is also not the only significant historical experience that might exert legacy effects, and multiple legacies could well be at work, whether precommunist (Russian imperial, Habsburg, Ottoman), pan-communist, or exclusive to the Soviet Union. Moreover, other logics of causation completely unrelated to the past are most certainly at work. We asked our authors to assess all these possibilities empirically in this volume, putting the claims of various legacy arguments associated with the communist experience to the test. We fully understand that important differences existed among communist countries even within Eastern Europe, let alone between the communist bloc and the Soviet Union. The inclusion of both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the analysis should help clarify what legacies might be specific to particular communist experiences (as evidenced, for instance, in Anna Grzymala-Busse's chapter on the relationship between religion and postcommunist states) and what might be the result of communist experiences more generally (for example, Grigore Pop-Eleches's chapter on the effect of communist education and urbanization on postcommunist political values). We believe that the important question is not whether historical legacies of communism exist, but rather where, in what spheres, in what manner, and why they do or do not manifest themselves. In this sense, we see our tasks as outlining an empirical agenda and providing an approach for answering questions rather than providing a definitive answer to the question of what are the historical legacies of communism.

**What Is a Historical Legacy?**

By a “legacy,” we mean a durable causal relationship between past institutions and policies on subsequent practices or beliefs, long beyond the life of the regimes, institutions, and policies that gave birth to them. In this respect, we would differentiate legacy arguments from other forms of nondisruptive continuities sometimes found within the historical (and even historical institutionalist) literature. Past and present are obviously interwoven in every society. But for us, broad continuity in and of itself does not qualify as a historical legacy. Rather, legacy arguments only fit situations when there has been

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a significant rupture between past and present – an end to one order and the beginning of another – that the legacy is supposed to straddle. In this respect, legacies are characteristic of a peculiar set of historical circumstances: specifically, macrohistorical ruptures such as revolutions, state collapse, decolonization, or major incidents of regime change. Here, there is overlap with the historical discipline (and with the historical institutionalist literature) to the extent that scholars elaborate the mechanisms by which broadly similar practices are observed across instances of major historical change, and these practices remain relatively durable over the long term. Thus, not all “critical juncture” arguments qualify as historical legacy arguments as we understand the term. Rather, legacy arguments for us are not about what remains the same so much as about what enables particular practices or beliefs to endure (and sometimes, to reemerge) – often in new form and to new purpose – in the context of large-scale macrohistorical change.

We also want to differentiate legacy arguments from the kinds of behaviors that result from structural isomorphism or functionalisms that carry over across historical divides. Andrew Janos (2000), for example, offers a grimly brilliant portrait of long-standing international hierarchies in Eastern Europe, showing Eastern Europe’s stubbornly persistent economic lag behind Western Europe and the ensuing envy of Western European prosperity, especially among elites. For him, this persisting international hierarchy produces continuity in the politics of backwardness. Janos writes not in terms of legacy, but rather in terms of fate. His is not a story of the embedded and durable impact of regimes, institutions, or policies, but rather of continuity in structural position.

In a sense, the type of causality involved in a legacy relationship is “genetic,” in that legacy arguments assume that particular practices or beliefs became embedded by a deep and formative historical experience that no longer exists (much like a gene might be passed on by a parent to a child and remain potentially influential in a child’s development beyond the life of the parent). In a legacy relationship, these “genetic” attributes grow salient in the life of the offspring society through a variety of causal mechanisms, some of which might come into play only in interaction with the environment of subsequent historical experience. As we know, not all of an individual’s genetic makeup affects a person’s behavior, individuals contain multiple sets of genes that might offset one another, genes often gain effect only in interaction with environmental causes, and most everyday behavior seems to be more affected by context and environment than by genetic background. Moreover, widespread debate is taking place over how “determinative” of behavior genes can be. Yet few would argue that genes have no effect on behavior. We think of historical legacies in much the same way: not all deeply embedded historical experiences affect subsequent behavior; legacies – to be effective – usually interact with other causal mechanisms and processes; multiple legacies might reinforce or contradict one another; most everyday behavior may have more to do with context than with legacies; and the extent to which legacies, even when operative, are

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“determinative” is subject to variation and investigation. By making this analogy, we in no way mean to imply that societies have a “genetic code” that determines their behavior; on the contrary, our attention to mechanisms, to the influence of other causal processes, and to variability in legacies precludes that type of thinking. Rather, we merely mean to turn attention to the process by which deeply embedded historical experiences might or might not form durable relationships over the long run.

To talk about the legacies of a prior order there need not be a total institutional collapse or dissolution; some organizational and institutional continuity is likely even during periods of major political upheaval or regime change. For example, the end of communist regimes did not, at least initially, lead to much change in the operation of educational institutions in most postcommunist states (Eklof et al. 2005) (though some changes eventually were introduced). Similarly, as Eugene Huskey points out in this volume, some executive institutions in Russia carried over directly across the initial regime-change divide. But even in these cases of organizational inertia there was no mere continuation of the past, as old institutional forms needed to adapt to a radically different political, economic, and societal environment. The changeover from central planning to a market economy would seem as great a rupture as could possibly be imagined. But equally momentous were the end of the political monopoly of the Communist Party and its network of institutions, the breakup of three states of the region into twenty-four states, the opening of the former communist lands to the outside world, the introduction of various degrees of political competition, and the easing of political regulation of societal development. In this sense, a legacy involves the persisting influence of the past within a broader context of large-scale macrohistorical change.

A quintessential example might be Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, written in 1856 (a half century after the events of the revolution), which argued that the centralized character of French absolutist monarchy fundamentally shaped post-1789 state institutions and political culture, notwithstanding the revolutionaries’ intentions to achieve a decisive rupture with the past, primarily because the revolutionaries kept the strong old regime state as their main instrument to smash everything (Tocqueville 1955). As the Tocquevillean example suggests, for a legacy to be evident with some degree of certainty there must be some significant time gap between the past and present in question, so that the purported relationship cannot be considered a temporary state of affairs. This is what we mean by the “durable” element of an historical legacy.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we differentiate between short-term effects that might be evident immediately after a macrohistorical rupture (and that soon fade) and the more lasting, long-term effects that rightfully belong to the realm of historical legacies.

To put the matter another way, it might have been possible to anticipate in the immediate years after communism’s collapse (when Jowitt, for instance, was writing) that some legacies of communism would be important going

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forward, but impossible to pinpoint accurately which specific legacies of the communist experience would endure. Precisely when the more enduring manifestations of communist legacies were first identifiable can be debated. Some would argue that two decades after the collapse, patterns of development have grown clearer, and in many spheres relative equilibria have been reached, so that one can begin to assess communism's legacies.<sup>9</sup> Others would argue that two decades is still too early to identify the long-term impact of the communist experience on postcommunist development, leading to the likelihood of what statisticians call Type I errors (identifying the presence of a legacy when in fact the phenomenon in question is only temporary). Ultimately, assessing legacies can only be accomplished through future examinations over an extended period of time. In this respect, the chapters of this volume might best be construed as one cut at identifying some of the possible historical legacies of communism, but ultimately whether they are correct in their assessments can only be determined over the *longue durée*.

One would expect the magnitude of the rupture (the extent to which it involves a disruption to ongoing societal relationships) to vary considerably across geographic, policy, and behavioral spheres and to exercise an independent effect on the degree to which old regime practices and beliefs might endure. Whether regime change occurs through a "handing over of the keys" to entrenched local elites (as occurred in Soviet Central Asia) or through extensive mass mobilization (as occurred in parts of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) should also influence whether and how legacies materialize. But it is also true that not all regimes and political orders leave significant legacies behind them. The effects of some are relatively fleeting, while others leave consequences that last for decades and even centuries beyond their demise. In theory, one should expect that the length and depth of a historical experience should be related to how broad a legacy it generates in its wake.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Eurasian and Eastern European communism was a relatively brief but deep experience. In those regions where it lasted longest (Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Belarus, and most of Ukraine), it endured for a little more than seventy years, extending across three generations; elsewhere in the Balkans, Central Europe, and the Baltic, it persisted for slightly more than forty years (two generations). Indeed, as noted earlier, much scholarship has pointed to this difference as critical in determining the impact of communism's historical legacies. But while brief, Eurasian and Eastern European communism also thoroughly transformed these societies; it totally reordered social structures, functioned as a modernizing device, and imposed similar political and economic institutions across an enormous variety of cultures. In this way communism may have exercised some kinds of homogenizing effects on the societies that experienced it, creating some elements of a distinctive culture that shared certain features irrespective of the specific cultural milieu in which it appeared (for example, the substitution of central planning for the market fostered analogous informal practices and shortages wherever it