



BOUNDARIES OF UTOPIA – IMAGINING COMMUNISM FROM PLATO TO STALIN

Erik van Ree

ROUTLEDGE

Boundaries of Utopia – Imagining Communism from Plato to Stalin

The idea that socialism could be established in a single country was adopted as an official doctrine by the Soviet Union in 1925, Stalin and Bukharin being the main formulators of the policy. Before this there had been much debate as to whether the only way to secure socialism would be as a result of socialist revolution on a much broader scale, across all Europe or wider still. This book traces the development of ideas about communist utopia from Plato onwards, paying particular attention to debates about universalist ideology versus the possibility for ‘socialism in one country’. The book argues that although the prevailing view is that ‘socialism in one country’ was a sharp break from a long tradition that tended to view socialism as only possible if universal, in fact the territorially confined socialist project had long roots, including in the writings of Marx and Engels.

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Erik van Ree

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Preface

This book has been very long in the making. Writing it has cost me perhaps two years, but the theme of socialism in one country, which is at the heart of the work, had my attention for many more. The first article I wrote about the subject was published in 1998.

Boundaries of Utopia might be read as a prequel to my 2002 book *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, in which I focused on the Soviet dictator's revolutionary patriotism. One of the points the present book makes is that the patriotic sentiment carried much weight in the socialist movement all along. Stalin was merely taking things a step further.

The patriotic element in socialism has long fascinated me. Socialism is commonly perceived as radically opposed to chauvinism and ethnocentrism. We all know, of course, that socialists did not always take internationalism all that seriously. It was quite common for them to appeal to the fatherland. National realities were too powerful to ignore. But it is not uncommon to find it being asserted that the internationalist ideal only began to be diluted at some point in time, for example by the social democrats in August 1914, or by Stalin when he announced in February 1931 that he would see to it that Russia would never be beaten again. Academics studying Stalinist chauvinism and xenophobia tend to frame these phenomena in terms of a process of degeneration of an essentially broad-minded, cosmopolitan, Marxist ideal. It is a feeling of uneasiness with this type of analysis that drove me to write this book.

Framing the problem of socialist patriotism in terms of a process of subversion has a powerful, intuitive attractiveness about it. It appeals to a widespread, often unconscious way in which we appreciate ideological systems in general. We tend to think – to feel might be the better word here – that the founders of such systems (be they Jesus Christ, Mohammed or Karl Marx) were great souls and that it is only the people that come after them, their followers, that convert their supposedly humanitarian messages into blood and iron. But what if some of the problems began with Jesus, Mohammed and Marx?

I have always felt that excellent studies of Stalinism go wrong the moment their authors assert that Stalin was adding all kinds of nasty qualities to

Marxism that the original did not have. This did not sit well with what I thought I knew about Marxism and other early socialisms. I can only hope that my analysis will come across as convincing.

It may come as a surprise to him, but I must first of all thank Arfon Rees for the idea of this book. At a presentation I gave about socialism in one country a few years ago, Arfon reminded me that communist utopians such as Thomas More tended to locate their ideal societies on islands, thus effectively reducing utopia to a state within certain boundaries: 'socialism in one country'! This train of thought led me to the working hypothesis that confined, 'insulated' communism was always the rule rather than the exception – from the early utopians to Stalin.

I must admit that it was an immense relief to be able to write this book, which uses published writings of socialists and communists as the main source, without exhausting trips to Moscow archives. It was a real luxury to have everything available in the library of the University of Amsterdam, five floors from my office, and in the International Institute of Social History (IISH), 500 metres from my home. I want to thank the staff of the library of the Faculty of Humanities and of the IISH for their excellent and friendly service through the years.

David Brandenberger, Robert Gellately, Artemy Kalinovsky, Michael Kemper, Ronald Suny, Ian Thatcher and Michael Wintle read the original book proposal and made many sober and helpful comments. Thank you. I would also like to thank Stephen White for his role in making this book possible. I want to thank Lars Lih, Christopher Read, Hans Schoots and Joris Versteeg for fruitful discussions over the years. The book has a very wide (some would say too wide) scope. I have ventured into areas where I am not at home. I couldn't have done this without the help of experts in these fields. The following people read and commented on one or more chapters: Andrew Bradstock, Kevin Callahan, Terrell Carver, Thomas von der Dunk, Thomas Fudge, Ernst Hanisch, Annie Jourdan, Lars Lih, Philip Pomper, Albert Rijksbaron, Jürgen Rojahn, Quentin Skinner, James Stayer, F. Peter Wagner and James White. Your comments have been very much appreciated. If my observations on Plato, the Anabaptists or Gerrard Winstanley are out of focus I am the only one to blame. My special thanks go to my friends David Brandenberger and Ian Thatcher who read the manuscript cover to cover, who were very critical as ever, and who forced me to rethink the outline and argument of the book. I hope the result is up to your standards. I have been endlessly pestering my Amsterdam colleagues about the title, which I just couldn't get right. The following people were my main victims: Nanci Adler, Sarah Crombach, Alex Drace-Francis, Dina Fainberg, Marc Jansen, Ben de Jong, Michael Kemper, Christian Noack, Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle. Thank you for not getting fed up with me (or not showing it). Finally, I am always afraid that I have forgotten somebody who needs to be thanked. If I have, please forgive me!

Some of the work used here was published in journal articles. I thank the editors/publishers for permitting me to reprint material from the following

articles: ‘Socialism in One Country: A Reassessment’, in *Studies in East European Thought*, 1998, vol. 50, no. 2: 77–117; ‘Nationalist Elements in the Work of Marx and Engels: A Critical Survey’, in *MEGA-Studien*, 2000, no. 1: 25–49; ‘Lenin’s Conception of Socialism in One Country, 1915–17’, in *Revolutionary Russia*, 2010, vol. 23, no. 2: 159–81; ‘“Socialism in One Country” before Stalin: German Origins’, in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2010, vol. 15, no. 2: 143–59; ‘German Marxism and the Decline of the Permanent Revolution, 1870–1909’, in *History of European Ideas*, 2012, vol. 38, no. 4: 570–89; ‘Georgii Plekhanov and the *Communist Manifesto*: The Proletarian Revolution Revisited’, in *Revolutionary Russia*, 2013, vol. 26, no. 1: 32–51; ‘Marxism as Permanent Revolution’, in *History of Political Thought*, 2013, vol. 34, no. 3: 540–63.

I dedicate this book to my father, Frank van Ree (1927–2013), who sadly did not live to see it published.

Erik van Ree

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Introduction

When the Bolsheviks seized power in the Russian capital of Petrograd in November 1917, they expected the workers' revolution to spread to other parts of Europe. They had especially high hopes for Germany, but their expectations failed to materialise. The failure of the communist revolution in January 1919 severely tested the nerves of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and his comrades. The murder of the celebrated communist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht hit them especially hard. To add to the disaster, the Hungarian Soviet Republic survived no longer than a couple of months, until the Romanian army put Béla Kun's regime out of its misery. In 1920 Lenin took the initiative into his own hands, when he sent the Red Army into Poland, in response to a Polish invasion of Soviet Russia. The Bolshevik leader hoped to establish a proletarian-socialist government in Warsaw so as to create a corridor to provide the German communists with military assistance. But in another bitter disappointment the Red Army was defeated before Warsaw. The so-called German October of 1923 formed the crown on this series of failures. The revolution fizzled out after some street fighting in Hamburg.

In the aftermath of the Great War many parts of Central and Eastern Europe were shaken by violent social unrest. But, not counting distant Mongolia, the communists did not manage to seize state power and to hold on to it in any other country. Soviet Russia remained alone. This was a dramatic turn of events for Lenin, who feared the proletarian state would be crushed if socialism failed to spread to other nations.

After Lenin's death the Bolshevik leadership decided to adapt party doctrine to the new geopolitical realities. They concluded that the Russian Revolution was less dependent on the world revolution than they had assumed back in 1917. In April 1925 the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) convened its Fourteenth Conference. It was at this occasion that the party officially adopted the doctrine of 'socialism in one country'.

The resolution adopted at the conference held that the construction of a socialist society did not depend on the world revolution. It was possible to construct a 'complete' socialist society in a single country surrounded by hostile capitalist states, and this even in 'backward' Russia. Yet, the resolution

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did not bid farewell to the world revolution. It was admitted that the successful establishment of socialism in one country could never signify the *'final'* victory of socialism. After all, however perfect its inner order might become, an isolated socialist state could never experience real security. One could never be sure that socialism in this one country would not be overthrown by foreign intervention. For victory to become final in the sense of irreversible, revolution in a number of other key capitalist states remained a requirement.¹

Socialism in one country has always, and rightly so, been considered one of the hallmarks of Stalinism. The doctrine reflected one of the main underlying motives of General-Secretary of the Communist Party, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: the drive to go it alone. It was Stalin's ambition to set up an economically and militarily powerful socialist state that would be as independent from external circumstances as possible. The world revolution was never abandoned, but Moscow's attention to it was considerably reduced. In the course of the years, socialism in one country spilled over into a robust Soviet patriotism and a Russo-centric cult of the Soviet state.²

On a closer look, we can distinguish three, largely overlapping motives in Stalinist socialism. First of all, socialism in one country: the establishment of a socialist economy in one particular country was not made conditional upon the spread of the revolution to other countries. It was assumed that even without the world revolution one country could have a fully functioning socialist economy. Second, the Stalinists nurtured a siege mentality. They regarded socialism as an isolated, embattled community in a hostile capitalist environment. And, third, as patriots, they took pride in the fact that it was their own country that was pioneering the new order.

This compound of Stalinist ideas and sentiments is usually regarded as sharply breaking with the internationalist tradition of the socialist movement. On the contrary, the present book argues that these Stalinist patterns are better read as confirmation and sanctification, albeit in a coarse, brutal form, of patterns that always had marked the socialist ideology. This is the way socialists had been imagining communism all along. It had been the rule rather than the exception to imagine the new order as an isolated and embattled community, quite often even as a single country, and more often than not socialists cast their own country in the honourable role of pioneer. As we will see, though they ruled out socialism in a single country, even staunch internationalists like Marx and Engels had been imagining the new society in insular and patriotic terms.

Socialism in one country before Stalin?

The assumption that single-country socialism represented a radical new departure on Stalin's part, a sharp break with a socialist tradition that was profoundly and essentially internationalist is quite widespread. To be sure, some eminent scholars have pointed out that socialism in one country was not Stalin's invention. In his biography of Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin's ally during

much of the 1920s and his victim in the 1930s, Stephen Cohen suggests that it was he, not Stalin, who in the early 1920s began to consider the possibility that isolated Russia could create a socialist society. Cohen furthermore argues that Stalin and Bukharin were justified in claiming that Lenin's final writings of 1922–3 had been pointing in that direction.³ Richard Day takes us back a little further in time, when he refers to War Commissar Leon Trotsky, of all people, as the first important Bolshevik to have developed a conception of socialism in one country during the years of the Civil War.⁴ Perhaps the first to have made the point is Christopher Hill, who suggested already in 1965, in an almost self-evident way, that, from 1917 onwards, Lenin worked under the assumption that, if necessary, Russia could construct socialism on its own.⁵ But all this takes us back no more than a few years.

My interest in the subject was aroused when I was writing my book about Stalin's political thought. I was struck by Trotsky's polemical observation that the real father of the idea of socialism in one country was the Bavarian social democrat, Georg von Vollmar, author of the 1878 *The Isolated Socialist State*.⁶ Undoubtedly, Trotsky enjoyed disclosing this, for Vollmar had been on the right wing of the German socialist party for most of his active life. It was highly embarrassing for Stalin that his celebrated idea had this kind of precursor. The existing literature contains incidental references to other German socialists that might have commented favourably on socialism in one country.⁷

I was also struck by what I learned about Karl Kautsky, the German social democrat who was widely regarded as the 'pope of orthodox Marxism' after Friedrich Engels's death in 1895. Kautsky predicted that international trade would be strongly reduced under socialism, and that socialist nations would have autarkic economies. He wrote this in his book about the social democratic programme adopted at the 1891 Erfurt party congress.⁸ The book was one of the most influential social democratic tractates of the time.

What also continued to bother me was Lenin's straightforward observation made in August 1915 that 'socialism in one country' was possible, and that this meant for the victorious proletariat to organise 'socialist production at home'.⁹ There is a powerful tendency in the scholarly literature not to take this literally, because Lenin just couldn't have intended this to be taken as such. To me this seemed a bit odd, and I wondered whether it did not say more about preconceptions about Lenin than about the man himself.

All this was enough to cast doubt on the established idea that Stalin's adoption of socialism in one country represented a sharp break with the existing socialist tradition. It seemed worth the effort to trace back the idea of single-country socialism and to find out how influential it had really been before Stalin.

Socialist patriotism

That it would not have been unusual for nineteenth-century socialists to imagine socialism locked up within one state runs up against the objection that

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the two foremost theoreticians of nineteenth-century socialism, Marx and Engels, ruled out this scenario for the era of the world market. They predicated the new society upon the contributions of a number of countries.

But this is less straightforward than it seems. To begin with, Marx and Engels were not the only voices in socialism. Marxist influences in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French and British socialism were limited. In Germany, Marxism became the most influential ideology in the social democratic party, but it never achieved anything like monopoly status. Even among Russian social democrats, the Marxist monopoly was never complete, and among the populists and socialists–revolutionaries Marxism was only one of a number of systems of thought competing for influence.

Also, the arguments against single-country socialism employed by Marx and Engels were never as scientifically self-evident as they thought they were. Nineteenth-century socialists trusted that socialism would be a vastly more efficient productive system than capitalism. Given that assumption, there was no obvious reason why an isolated socialist economy could not outcompete its competitors on the world market. And even though an isolated socialist state would in all likelihood be subjected to economic blockades, it would depend on the size of the country and on the financial and natural resources at its disposal, whether it might be able to withdraw into a form of autarky or might wither and collapse, as Marx and Engels expected. And why would it be preordained that a powerful socialist country with a powerful army would suffer defeat against a capitalist coalition? There is no reason to assume that Marx and Engels's position would have been accepted by other socialists as a matter of course.

That said, it still sounds counterintuitive that many socialists would have accepted the possibility of socialism in one country. Wouldn't the spirit of socialist internationalism have prevented this?

The current interpretation of Stalinism as a radically new departure is embedded in a historical myth of great dramatic power. Essentially, it is a myth of betrayal. As the story goes, the socialist movement was originally infused with idealistic internationalism. The famous appeal of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*: '*Proletarians of all countries, unite!*' captures the essence of the spirit.¹⁰ The very name of the International Workingmen's Association, established by Karl Marx and others in 1864, breathed internationalism. After the unfortunate demise of this organisation in the 1870s, a Socialist International was restored in 1889. The frequent congresses of this organisation highlighted the sincere attempts of the socialists to find a common platform in the struggle against capitalism and war. However, the story continues, in August 1914 patriotism abruptly gained the upper hand in the socialist movement. When the Great War broke out, most member parties of the International surrendered their laudable idealism and turned round to support the war efforts of their own governments. This represented the first great betrayal. Lenin is the single most influential person to have made us see 1914 in these terms. The Russian social democrats were among the few to uphold the old idealism, but, as the

story reaches its dramatic climax, only a decade on they too – they were now calling themselves communists – cast the principle of international solidarity overboard. In what for Trotsky represented the second great betrayal, Stalin established state patriotism under the façade of socialism in one country.

So much for the myth. The problem is that the serious scholarly literature never presented what occurred in August 1914 as either a great betrayal or as an abrupt transition from internationalism to patriotism. Socialism was never a pristine internationalist movement.

Proletarian internationalism reflected the position of nineteenth-century industrial workers with very few political and economic rights. This served effectively to lock them out of the nation. Left out in the cold among their own national communities, radical workers would naturally look to their companions in distress in other countries for support and solidarity. Furthermore, the socialists understood that, for all the cut-throat competition on the international market, economic globalisation also served to bring the bourgeois classes together. The entrepreneurs of the world knew how to defend their common interests against the working people. The workers had no other choice, the socialists believed, than to respond with close international cooperation of their own.

Even so, socialist patriotism represented a powerful reality. There were many reasons for this, the first of which is to be found in the emotional sphere. With Igor Primoratz, we can define patriotism as ‘love of country, identification with it, and special concern for its well-being and that of compatriots’.¹¹ Patriotism as an emotion, ‘natural or instinctive patriotism’, can be distinguished from those varieties in which a particular philosophy or ideal underpins it.¹² But the very definition of ‘love of country’ suggests that an emotion lies at its basis. There is no good reason why socialists would be immune to this emotion. Socialists too may love their country, regardless even of whether or not it hosts a socialist economy. As long as the love of other peoples for their country would be accepted as equally legitimate, there would be no necessary conflict with socialist internationalism.

From the political angle, the state simply was the main existing framework, and the socialists could ignore this reality only at their peril. As revolutionaries, they were keen on mobilising a following, which would consist mostly of compatriots. To ignore patriotic sentiments would have condemned the socialists to irrelevance.

Sociologically, the strengthening of the patriotic urge in the European socialist parties can be tied to an underlying process of working-class integration. In the course of the second half of the nineteenth century the workers were provided with ever more security and rights. This would have increased their sense of having a stake in the country, and, as they became socially more integrated, the workers became correspondingly more open to patriotic concerns.¹³

Arguably, the very fact that socialists were revolutionaries defined them as patriots. By the act of revolution, revolutionaries seize power and seize their

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own country. Revolution turns the people lining up behind the revolutionaries, those devoid of political and economic rights, into citizens of the state. Even the most internationalist of socialists understood this mechanism. Marx and Engels recognised that, 'in form', the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie at first remains 'national', in so far as each proletariat must overthrow its own bourgeoisie. In another celebrated passage of the *Communist Manifesto*, they declared that the workers 'have no fatherland', only to continue in a clear echo of the spirit of the French Revolution:

Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must become the national class [*sich zur nationalen Klasse erheben*], must constitute itself the nation, it remains national itself, though not at all in the bourgeois sense of the word.¹⁴

In short, the revolution would provide the workers with the fatherland they did not have. In his first Elberfeld speech in February 1845 Engels confirmed that the workers of a communist state would have a 'real fatherland' to defend and that they would act with the kind of enthusiasm and courage the French revolutionary armies had displayed from 1792 to 1799.¹⁵ The idea that the workers would acquire a fatherland through revolution was accepted by SPD luminaries Kautsky, August Bebel as well as Eduard Bernstein.¹⁶

The inspiring example of the French Revolution was another important historical factor keeping socialism under the spell of revolutionary patriotism. The spectacle of a powerful revolutionary state throwing its armies against the rest of Europe continued to inspire socialists. Also, through much of the nineteenth century, the national question remained on the agenda. The socialists were only too willing to contribute to the patriotic movements of Poland, Hungary, Italy and Germany, to mention only the most celebrated causes championed by the revolutionary left. Somewhat paradoxically, it was precisely the extra dose of patriotism that provided socialists with the needed emotional momentum to allow their followers to identify with an internationalist ideology that might otherwise have been experienced as too sterile.¹⁷

It is acknowledged in the literature that socialist patriotism had been an important reality in the decades before the Great War broke out. Tellingly, for example, even though the socialist parties went out of their way to avert international war, they never relinquished their right to national defence to counter aggression. Even the most outspoken Marxist leaders such as Bebel proudly presented themselves as patriots.¹⁸ In his last years, Engels was particularly insistent that, in case Russia attacked Germany, the country's 'national existence' would have to be defended in the spirit of the French revolutionary wars of 1793.¹⁹

Werner Conze and Dieter Groh conceptualise the predominant mood among the German social democrats in the decades prior to the war in terms of a 'double loyalty' to the international working class and to the

fatherland.²⁰ Kevin Callahan introduced the term ‘inter-nationalism’ to characterise the parties of the Socialist International. Callahan acknowledges the reality of proletarian internationalism, but in his interpretation this idea was meant to refer to close cooperation between independent nations, to each of which the socialists of those nations felt themselves to be patriotically indebted.²¹

All this helps us to understand why socialism in one country long antedated Stalin. The academic literature has an elegant sociological explanation for the Bolsheviks’ acceptance of single-country socialism during the 1920s: they adapted Marxism to the geopolitical context in which they were forced to operate. Soviet Russia *was*, after all, an isolated state. In formulating socialism in one country, Stalin simply adapted the idea to the realities of the day. Context was all. So far so good, but if other socialist parties had been subject to a process of national integration, wouldn’t those parties have allowed their imagination of socialism to be stamped by their own national contexts as well? And if the patriotic sentiment had in fact been all too common, wouldn’t socialists of other nations have felt just as thrilled as the Bolsheviks by the idea that their own nation might play a pioneering role in the new world order? How plausible is it, on the face of it, to assume that socialism in one country began with Stalin?

Imagining communism

As will be shown in this book, many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialists had been assuming that, as a first step, the new society could and most likely would be constructed within the confines of a single country. Socialism in one country was no radical new departure on Stalin’s part, but the reinvention of an existing idea in a new context.

This conclusion gains in historical depth if we include older utopian schemes of common ownership from the era before the socialist workers’ movement in our exploration. Plato envisioned his ideal state, ruled by a ‘communist’ elite voluntarily refraining from owning private property, on the scale of a city. Thomas More did not fantasise about a communist world but about a single communist island. The seventeenth-century Digger, Gerrard Winstanley, expected England to become the first communist commonwealth in the world, and eighteenth-century French communist utopians never doubted that France would blaze the trail. Seen over the long historical run, ‘socialism in one country’ represented the rule rather than the exception.

Things changed, of course, when modern socialism emerged and Marx and Engels’s views began to gain ever wider currency. Undeniably, these two men firmly ruled out the single-country scenario. What is more, it became the official standpoint of the German and Russian social democratic parties that socialism required the input of a number of advanced countries.

Yet, the first socialist community continued to be imagined as an ‘island’. Marx and Engels expected the new order first to come into existence in a

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'little corner' of the world, as Marx wrote to his friend in October 1858.²² The two friends worked under the assumption that revolution was a contagious process, touching one country after another. Even so, only a very small number of countries possessed the requisite conditions for proletarian government. The socialist mode of production would first be established on the territory of an alliance of countries, most likely Great Britain, France and Germany, that would have to survive in a world dominated by hostile forces. This scenario was only marginally more universalist than what Vollmar and others were proposing: in both cases, socialism was imagined as a community within borders that did not need the global scope to survive.²³

The alternative scenario of radical dependence on the world revolution ruled out socialism within borders. The creation of a socialist society in any one place would always be dependent on the progression of the revolution to other places. If no new revolutions occurred, the victorious workers of the trailblazing community would not be able to consolidate their rule and establish socialism. Remarkably, it is very hard to find socialists who took this radical position. The most significant case I found was Russian social democrats, for example Trotsky, who during the Great War suggested that socialism was incompatible, *as matter of principle*, with state borders, and that a socialist economy required the scale of all of Europe to be viable. But even that can, of course, be regarded as a non-territorialised scenario only from a Eurocentric perspective.

That Thomas More located his utopia literally on an island was a literary genre that came and went. But, metaphorically, the socialists continued to sing to his tune. Almost all socialists, including Marx and Engels, expected the socialist society to come into the world as an island surrounded by a capitalist sea, an oasis in the capitalist world desert.

Generally speaking, the whole idea of refashioning a country on a principle antagonistic to that ruling in all the rest of the world is bound to focus citizens on the preservation and cultivation of their own community. And it will be hard for them to regard other countries, representing a hostile principle, as anything other than a threat.

More concretely, the ideal of common ownership is highly conducive to the insular imagination of socialism. If it is about bringing people together, then, in a universalising dynamic, the crowning achievement would be to extend common ownership worldwide. But turning citizens into co-owners would also open up another dynamic working in the opposite direction. There would be created a strong and exclusive bond between citizens and an orientation onto each other that formerly was not there. Under private ownership, the individual entertains distant but essentially similar economic relations with compatriots and foreigners: there is no sharing with either category. This cosmopolitan orientation would, however, abruptly be destroyed once a community would introduce common ownership. This would create a wholly new distinction between compatriots, with whom one shares one's property, and foreigners, with whom, as before, one does not, and with whom,

therefore, one would not experience the strong communitarian bond. Common ownership fosters a collective inward-looking orientation, a drawing together, and a sense of separateness that tends to overrule universalist commitments.

The ideal of common ownership always had strong communitarian connotations. Socialists were fantasising about a powerfully integrated, 'intimate' commonwealth of dedicated citizens held together by a sharing scheme. Dependent on times and conditions, they would fantasise either about a city-state, a nation state, an empire or about an alliance of countries – but in the beginning there would always be this commonwealth. That the system in due course would have to spread to the rest of the world went without saying, but that was a consideration of the second order. The world revolution came last not first.

It cannot be denied that socialism was a universalist ideology. For Marx and Engels, the socialist *Dreibund* was a mere step on the ladder of world communism. That even remained the case for Stalin, for whom socialism in one country was a mere phase, and who even in his darkest anti-cosmopolitan days would have rejected the idea that socialism suited only one chosen people. But the socialist imagination did allow the establishment of the new society on the territory of one or a few countries. The stagnation of the world revolution would *not* doom it to collapse. The socialist ideology can best be regarded as a form of 'confined universalism', a universalist ideology that *initially* could, and most likely would, remain locked within territorial boundaries.²⁴

We will furthermore see in the course of this book that it was very common for proponents of common ownership to dream of *their own* country as the pioneer of socialism. The nineteenth-century Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini introduced a term that is particularly useful here. Mazzini speculated that the republican order would be pioneered by one particular vanguard nation, which he called the 'initiator-people'.²⁵ Mazzini's term fits the socialist movement very well. Socialists following the single-country scenario with only few exceptions assumed that their own people would be the initiators. Strikingly, even Marx and Engels conformed to this patriotic pattern: they never doubted that their own fatherland would be among the trailblazers. To be sure, Germany couldn't do it alone, but it would be among the select group of most favoured nations breaking the path.

Why was socialism wedded to these insular and patriotic patterns? It is not as if More's island utopia, or any other work of communist fantasy, made such an impression on socialists that they couldn't let go of it. Strictly speaking, we are not even dealing here with a tradition. There was no chain of references from one socialist to another, underpinning the idea that the new society would first emerge in a little corner of the world. Stalin was not interested in establishing a pedigree for socialism in one country. Apart from references to Lenin, there is no indication that he was inspired by Vollmar, Kautsky or by anybody else. Rather than copying prescriptions, Stalin was acting on circumstance: the Bolsheviks accepted socialism in one country for

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