
Rediscovering Europe's Lost Revolution

BY

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Cold War stereotypes have blocked our understanding of European politics after 1945. On both sides of the future Iron Curtain, liberation from Nazism unleashed a spirit of radical democracy that might have led Europe down a very different path if not for superpower intervention.

Review of Socialism Across the Iron Curtain: Socialist Parties in East and West and the Reconstruction of Europe after 1945 by Jan De Graaf (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Socialism Across the Iron Curtain is an important book. This monograph by Jan De Graaf brings into question the usual manner in which mainstream historians have portrayed a crucial moment in twentieth-century European history.

De Graaf's work covers Europe's immediate post-liberation period from 1944 to 1948, and focuses on the evolution of socialist (or social-democratic) parties in these eventful years. It covers four countries in particular, two on each side of the eventual Cold War divide — France, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia — and offers a long-overdue reassessment of two widespread narratives.

A Misleading Orthodoxy

Historians habitually present Europe's socialist parties as having undergone a more or less straightforward evolution from the time of August Bebel to that of Tony Blair. This perspective depicts social democracy, originally a product of bitterly fought social struggles in the late nineteenth century, as a gradually but continuously moderating political family.

According to this view, socialist parties first joined coalition governments with more conservative forces on a widespread scale in the course of World War I, after which the interwar period saw them adopt an ever-greater sense of "national responsibility." Most sections of the Socialist International

mutated from being Marxist-influenced opponents of the socio-political status quo to become increasingly enthusiastic defenders of the very same system. They exchanged the battle for social revolution for the pursuit of mere social reforms within the constraints of the dominant paradigm.

Standard works of history and social-scientific analysis — De Graaf frequently refers to Dietrich Orlow and Sheri Berman as prominent gatekeepers of this line — identify the period which was opened up by the defeat of the Nazi empire in 1945 as one in which social democracy moderated its political character ever further. This entailed giving full support to elite projects that were meant to preserve capitalism — albeit with a more human face — rather than replace it with something completely different.

The second narrative challenged by De Graaf considers the Cold War divide to have been all-important in shaping European politics after 1945. Portraits of political traditions in any number of European states usually take it as self-evident that the emerging gulf between the two blocs determined just about everything.

For socialist parties, this meant that Eastern European organizations linked to the nether sphere of the Socialist International evolved into supporters of Moscow's Cold War line, while Western European movements embraced the presumed advantages of "freedom and democracy" and eventually the US Marshall Plan.

Transcending the Iron Curtain

Jan de Graaf punctures both historiographical myths through an extremely rich transnational and comparative analysis of action and debate among socialist milieus in his four chosen states. He finds that attempts to "apply universal models to the history of post-war continental socialism" constitute an ideologically motivated misinterpretation of historical reality. Socialist parties harbored radical propensities at a much later stage than the conventional view would indicate, and the divide between moderate and radical tendencies cannot be mapped onto the Cold War schism between east and west.

As De Graaf concludes on the book's final page:

If we really want to make sense of post-war European socialism and, by extension, post-war Europe as a whole, we have to transcend the Iron Curtain that still exists in historiography.

De Graaf, profiting from his familiarity with West European and Slavic languages alike, amasses an impressive amount of empirical data that shows the moment of liberation between 1944 and 1948 to have been a period of profound social unrest. This unrest was fueled by growing inequalities and the failure of postwar governments to provide a decent standard of living after years of sacrifice and heavy exactions under Nazi rule.

It also drew strength from a spirit of revolt against the authoritarian, top-down policies pursued in each of the four countries that De Graaf examines. Incipient rebellions openly targeted the ruling coalitions in the respective states, all of which included socialist parties:

This pattern of rank-and-file workers reproaching their leaders for failing to provide for their everyday necessities would repeat itself over and over again during the months and

years to follow. The common charge was that political and trade-union leaders were so immersed in high politics and macro-economic management, now that they were finally in shared power, that they had lost sight of the real problems besetting the very people they were representing.

For De Graaf, this explosive situation left workers “with the impression of a ruling class primarily concerned with closing ranks on itself.” In all four states, socialist leaders found themselves accused of colluding with Communism, but also with more conservative political and economic forces.

Two Socialist Camps

De Graaf shows that European socialism in the mid-1940s was in fact profoundly divided over the way ahead. At leadership level, European socialist parties divided into two broad camps. One camp placed its faith in efforts to broaden the appeal of such parties beyond their traditional working-class constituencies. Such openness towards an alliance with the middle classes, however ill-defined, went hand-in-hand with a principled embrace of the rules and regulations of parliamentary democracy.

Leaders who belonged to this first camp decisively opposed calls for a more participatory form of democracy based on grassroots democratic institutions, or for the democratization of economic life. They were ever more beholden to a line of moderation and making peace with the political and economic establishment, to which their parties soon belonged.

Adherents of the second camp, on the other hand, continued to stress the working-class character of socialist parties. They were more open to practical instances of participatory democracy, which were rather widespread at the moment of liberation, and did not place all their hopes in the framework of traditional parliaments and constitutions.

None of the parties examined in detail by De Graaf — French, Italian, Polish, Czechoslovakian — aligned itself unambiguously with one of these two camps, and they all contained minority currents. But overall, as De Graaf convincingly demonstrates, it makes sense to subdivide the four parties into two groups of two, which did not correspond to the emerging Cold War blocs. The French and Czechoslovakian parties adhered to the more moderate camp, the Italian and Polish parties to the more radical one.

De Graaf goes on to locate the source of this division between his chosen movements in their conflicting experiences of parliamentary democracy. This political form had demonstrated its value as a guarantor of fundamental rights, including the rights of workers, in interwar Czechoslovakia and France. In those countries, authoritarian rule only gained the upper hand at the very end of this period as a result of Nazi aggression.

In contrast, socialists in Poland and Italy saw no reason to put their faith in parliaments, constitutions or the supposedly stabilizing role of middle-class parties and social constituencies, having already experienced the triumph of authoritarian regimes in the 1920s, long before the Second World War began.

This is an important observation, based on close and skillful analysis of four widely differing national political cultures and traditions, and it shows that Cold War stereotypes obstruct us from understanding the political dynamics of the time. But we should also point out a certain lacuna in De Graaf's picture of this moment in European history.

He is well aware of the various radical challenges that emanated from below to the post-liberation

status quo. However, *Socialism Across The Iron Curtain* does not look in detail at what was actually happening on the factory floor, or in those vast stretches of territory liberated by the resistance rather than Allied armies.

A Neglected Episode

The recent seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations of Victory in Europe Day continued the tradition of stressing the military prowess of the Allied forces — especially those in Western Europe — and downplaying the contribution of resistance movements. D-Day in Normandy received far more attention than the liberation of Italy in a campaign that lasted almost two years, or the second Allied landing on French shores, in August 1944 on the Côte d’Azur. Meanwhile, the incredible bloodletting of the Red Army on the eastern front was consistently relegated to the sidelines.

The point is not to deny the central contribution of these Allied military campaigns — including the Soviet one — to the defeat of Nazism. But even the most cursory glance at events on the ground in Italy and France tells an important supplementary tale that is largely forgotten today. Few citizens of contemporary France, for example, will be aware that military units of the resistance effectively liberated about half of French territory — although this action did come on the coattails of Allied victories elsewhere.

Vast stretches of France south of the Loire and west of the Rhône never saw an Allied soldier, other than the occasional liaison officer parachuted in to establish contact with resistance forces. The liberation of southern France included significant operations, such as the encircling and capture of the city of Limoges with its well-defended German garrison by eight thousand resistance fighters under the leadership of the “Limousin Tito,” Georges Guingouin.

When the second French landing by the Allies began, their commanders had estimated it would take them three months to reach Grenoble. However, as a key leader of the resistance in this region, Alain Le Ray remembers: “They covered the distance in seven days almost without incident.”

Resistance fighters cleared the path for Allied troops to rush north. With a few exceptions such as Grenoble itself, the major population centers in the vast stretch between Lake Geneva, the Rhône Valley, and the Italian border were liberated by resistance fighters, sometimes acting well in advance of the Allied forces. There was a very similar situation in Italy from Tuscany northward.

Here, the resistance was also firmly implanted in urban areas. Across the whole of northern Italy to the west of Bologna, carefully planned urban insurrections and guerrilla battles liberated towns and cities, including the so-called industrial triangle that comprised Milan, Turin, and Genoa. When US troops arrived in Genoa, they could merely express their admiration upon entering the vast port city the day after its liberation: “A wonderful job!”

Liberation Committees

The resistance acted to fill the power vacuum left by the retreating Nazis by setting up grassroots representative bodies called Liberation Committees, which took shape in every town and city, small or large, in many urban neighborhoods, and even in villages. These committees undertook the initial

reconstruction of political life, economic activity, and social infrastructure throughout northern Italy and much of southern France.

A report by the US Office of Strategic Services — precursor to the CIA — described the scene in Florence:

When the Allied armies arrived in Florence, they encountered, for the first time in a major Italian city, a nearly complete administrative organization established by determined and purposeful anti-Fascist forces. A provisional system, worked out to the last detail, already was functioning as an unchallenged *de facto* authority under the auspices of the Tuscan Committee of National Liberation, which regards itself as the legitimate representative of the Italian government and aspires to Allied recognition as such.

The Liberation Committees were the sole actually existing representative bodies at the moment of liberation across a huge area, having been constituted by an alliance of political forces that spanned the range from center-right to radical-left.

The capillary structures of local, regional, and national Liberation Committees also operated within individual factories and other enterprises. Among other things, they made a vital contribution to the physical repairs that were necessary after the fighting. Moreover, such factory- or office-based Liberation Committees carried out their work in the spirit of workers' control or even workers' self-management.

They often had no choice but to do so, since the owners or managers in their workplaces had often been enthusiastic collaborators with Nazism who had now fled or gone into hiding. This dense network of workplace committees, operating in tandem with committees organized along territorial lines, gave a practical demonstration of the potential for working-class initiatives that existed for some time after liberation.

In France, hundreds of factory committees dotted the map: they had their strongest presence in southern regions but were by no means absent elsewhere. The Italian committees were more widespread than their French counterparts. Regional delegates from the railways met repeatedly to draw up a plan of action for their industry.

Delegates from the largest enterprises in Genoa and its environs, a crucial manufacturing and transport hub, held regular gatherings to determine the way ahead. These workplace committees also had a strong foothold in white-collar employment sectors such as banking and insurance.

Structures of Representation

This elemental wave of democratic aspirations and creative energies fueled the radical critiques of post-liberation politics in France and Italy that Jan De Graaf describes so well. However, De Graaf's book does not do justice to the grassroots networks which had created that groundswell of opinion in the first place.

Although the author, to his credit, does allude to the Liberation Committees in both countries, he refers to them as “communist-dominated” without documenting this assertion. De Graaf also uncritically reproduces the opinion of French socialist politicians, who apparently believed that “the

post-war council movement, far from democratizing political and economic life, often represented the law of the jungle.”

In fact, the territorial Liberation Committees allocated seats on a scrupulously even basis among all the locally relevant organizations. Conservative forces usually received a share of representation that was far in excess of their actual role in the resistance. Communists did have a strong presence in the factory-based Liberation Committees, but generally not because they sought to dominate and manipulate these structures.

There are plenty of accounts in the archives from local activists who were desperate to find someone to represent the Italian Liberal Party, for example — an antifascist organization, but also one committed to free-market ideology. For the most part, they were unsuccessful, since it was hard to find such advocates of economic liberalism, even in a factory with thousands (sometimes tens of thousands) of blue-collar workers.

De Graaf does not grasp the role and function of the committees in French and Italian politics and ends up depicting these episodes of grassroots democracy in an undeservedly negative light. This in turn helps explain his leaning toward the moderate camp in European socialism at the moment of liberation.

Of course, it is an author’s right — and perhaps even duty — to display their political colors, but this is best done on a level playing field. As a conscientious historian, De Graaf recognizes the diversity of social models that were promoted by the different tendencies of European socialism, and the fact that they transcended the Cold War divide. But he ends up denigrating the more radical pathways on the basis of ill-founded value judgments, and sometimes factual inaccuracies.

The question of whether the Italian and Polish socialists truly were principled defenders of factory committees is a broader one that we cannot do justice to here. At one point, De Graaf cites the assessment of Peter Heumos, a leading historian of Eastern European socialism, who argued that the Czechoslovakian socialists were far from consistent in their support for grassroots democracy after the liberation. My own research on the attitudes of their Italian counterparts would mirror the findings of Heumos.

I will make one final observation: in his effort to demonstrate the alignment of socialist parties into moderate and radical camps that cut across the Cold War line, De Graaf does sometimes go too far in order to establish this neat compartmentalization, although once again there is not enough space here to go into the details of this point. Yet these criticisms should not detract from recognizing the vital contribution *Socialism Across the Iron Curtain* will make to historiography. It is a book that deserves a wide and careful readership.

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