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KARL MARX

1818 - 1883

Karl Marx, the principal originator of "scientific socialism," was born in 1818, in the town of Trier, Germany. His father was a lawyer, and at seventeen Karl entered the University of Bonn to study law himself. Later, however, he transferred to the University of Berlin, and he eventually was awarded a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Jena.

Marx then turned to journalism, and for a while he was the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne. But his radical political views soon got him into trouble, and he moved to Paris. There he met Friedrich Engels, and the close personal and political friendship they formed was to endure for the rest of their lives. Though each wrote several books in his own name, their intellec-

tual collaboration was so close that their combined output can reasonably be treated as a single joint achievement. Indeed, Marx and Engels are being treated as a joint entry in this book, though listed under Marx's name alone, as he is generally (and I think rightly) considered to have been the dominant partner.

Marx was soon expelled from France, and he then moved to Brussels. It was there, in 1847, that he published his first significant work, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. The following year, he and Engels co-authored the *Communist Manifesto*, their most widely read work. Later that year, Marx returned to Cologne, but was expelled in a matter of months. He then moved to London, where he spent the rest of his life.

Although he earned some money as a journalist, Marx spent the bulk of his time in London doing research and writing books on politics and economics. (During those years, Marx and his family were supported primarily by generous contributions from Engels.) The first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx's most important work, appeared in 1867. When Marx died, in 1883, the other two volumes had not yet been completed; they were edited and published by Engels from the notes and manuscripts that Marx left behind.

Marx's writings form the theoretical basis of Communism, as well as many modern forms of socialism. At the time Marx died, no country had yet put his ideas into practice. In the century since then, however, Communist governments were established in many places, including Russia and China; and in dozens of other countries movements based on his teachings have arisen and have attempted to gain power. The activities of those Marxist parties—activities which have included propaganda, assassinations, terrorism, and rebellions in order to achieve power, plus wars, brutal repression, and bloody purges after reaching power—kept the world in turmoil for decades and have caused roughly *100 million* deaths! No philosopher in history has had so great an impact on the world in the century after he wrote. You may believe—as I do—that Marxism has been a disaster, both economically and politically; but surely it has not been an insignificant movement. Indeed, the only reason Marx has not been ranked even higher in this book is that he must share the credit—or rather, the blame—

for what has occurred with many other persons, including such notable figures as Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong.

In view of the foregoing, it is clear that Marx deserves a high place on this list. The question is, how high should he be ranked? Even if one acknowledges the enormous influence that Communism has had, one may still question the importance of Marx himself within the Communist movement. The actual conduct of the Soviet government was never rigidly controlled by the works of Marx. He wrote about concepts such as the Hegelian dialectic and the surplus value of labor, and such abstractions seem to have had little effect on the day-to-day policies of the Russian or Chinese governments.

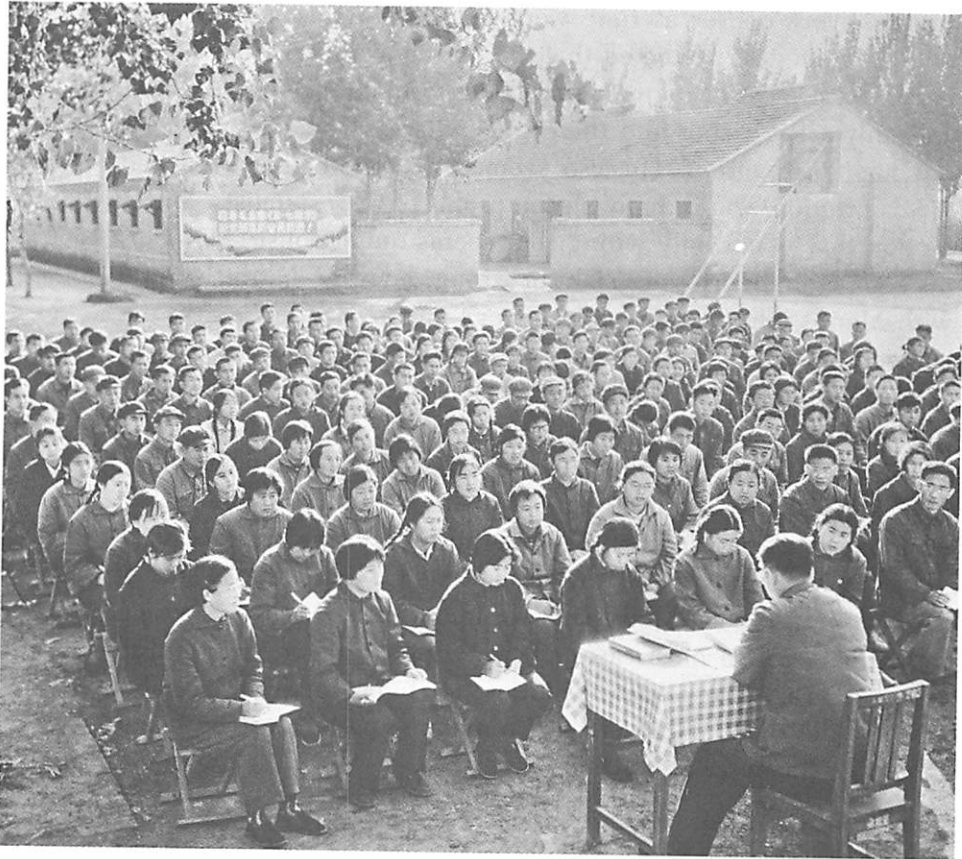
It has often been pointed out that the Marxist theory of economics is badly in error. Certainly, many of Marx's specific predictions have turned out to be incorrect. For example, he predicted that in capitalistic countries the working people would become progressively poorer as time went on; clearly, this has not happened. Marx also predicted that the middle class would be eliminated, with most of its members falling back into the proletariat, and only a few rising into the capitalist class. Obviously, this has not happened either. He also seemed to believe that increased mechanization would diminish the profits of the capitalists, a prediction that is not only wrong, but seems quite foolish. Whether his economic theories are right or wrong, however, has little to do with Marx's influence. A philosopher's importance lies not in the correctness of his views, but in whether his ideas move people to action. Judged on that basis, Marx was unquestionably of enormous importance.

Marxist movements have generally stressed four main ideas: (1) A few rich persons live in great wealth, while most workers live in comparative poverty. (2) The way to rectify this injustice is to set up a socialist system; that is, a system where the means of production are owned by the government rather than by private individuals. (3) In most cases, the only practical way to establish this system is by a violent revolution. (4) To preserve this socialist system, the dictatorship of the Communist party must be maintained for a considerable time.

Each of the first three ideas had been clearly stated long before Marx. The fourth statement is derived in part from Marx's idea of "the dictatorship of the proletariat." However, the duration of the Soviet dictatorship appears to have been more a result of the practices of Lenin and Stalin than of the writings of Marx. It has therefore been claimed by some that Marx's influence on Communism has been more nominal than real, and that the respect paid to his writings is mere window dressing, an attempt to claim "scientific" justification for ideas and policies that would have been adopted anyway.

While there is some truth in such claims, they are surely much too extreme. Lenin, for example, did not merely claim to follow Marx's teachings; he had actually read them, fully accepted them, and believed that he was following them. The same is true

Chinese citizens at a cadre school in Beijing receive instruction in Marxism.



of Mao Zedong and of many other Communist leaders. True, Marx's ideas may have been misunderstood or reinterpreted; however, the same could be said for the ideas of Jesus, Buddha, or Muhammad. If *all* the main policies of the various Marxist governments and movements had been directly derived from the writings of Karl Marx, he would be even higher on this list.

Some of Marx's ideas—for example, his interesting notion of “the economic interpretation of history”—are apt to remain influential even if Communism itself dies out. Plainly, though, a major factor in deciding how high Marx should be ranked will be one's estimate of the importance of Communism in the long-term history of the world. A century after Marx's death, there were well over a billion persons who were at least nominally his followers. This was a greater number of adherents than any other ideology has ever had—not just in absolute numbers, but also as a fraction of the total world population. That fact led many Communists to hope (and anti-Communists to fear) that the future might well see the eventual worldwide triumph of Marxism.

In the first edition of this book I wrote, “though one cannot be sure just how far Communism will go and just how long it will last, it should be apparent by now that the ideology is solidly entrenched, and will be a major influence in the world for at least a few centuries to come.” It now appears that that estimate was unduly pessimistic. With the renunciation of Communism by Russia, by the other republics of the former Soviet Union, and by most of the countries that had been client states of the Soviet Union, the role of Marxism in the world has declined precipitously over the past few years; and one certainly gets the impression that that decline is irreversible.

If that is indeed the case—and I suspect that it is—then it would seem that the interval during which Marxism was a major force will turn out to be only about a century, rather than many centuries. The overall influence of Karl Marx will therefore be a good deal less than I had estimated in the first edition of this book. Even then, he will still be a significantly more important figure than either Napoleon or Hitler: The impact of those men was both briefer than Marx's and less extensive geographically.