Revolutions in Red

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Introduction

This book traces the comparative histories of communist movements across Asia between 1917 and 1976, with sustained attention to China, Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, and India. The years bracket two emblematic moments: the October Revolution, which supplied a grammar of revolution and a transnational network of instruction, and the mid-1970s, when victories in China and Vietnam had remade the regional landscape even as catastrophic defeat in Indonesia and fragmentation in India revealed the limits of revolutionary possibility. Rather than narrating five national stories in isolation, this volume reads them together to illuminate common patterns and local adaptations, asking why similar ideas yielded divergent outcomes across neighboring societies.

At the heart of the inquiry is the interplay of ideology, peasant mobilization, and international networks. Marxism-Leninism reached Asia already refracted through colonial hierarchies, racialized labor markets, and agrarian worlds far from the European factory. Parties learned quickly that doctrine could not simply be imported; it had to be translated—conceptually into categories that made sense to villagers and practically into tactics that could survive repression. The turn to the countryside in China, the mass-front strategies in Vietnam, the state-building project in the North of Korea, the broad coalitionism and later vulnerability of Indonesia’s PKI, and the episodic insurgencies and party splits in India together show that ideological success depended less on textual fidelity than on organizational learning and the ability to bind moral economy, nationalism, and social justice into a single project.

Peasant mobilization was the decisive hinge. Land, tax burdens, and tenancy relations structured grievances, but mobilization took off only where cadres could recode everyday injustices into an actionable politics and link village demands to credible promises of reform. Revolutionary zones emerged where authorities were weak, terrain was favorable, and movements could provide services—security, arbitration, literacy—alongside coercion. Yet peasant worlds were never uniform. Ethnicity, caste, clan, and religion cut across class identities, producing both solidarities and limits. The same land reform that bound some communities to the party could fracture others along gendered lines of labor or religious affiliation. The comparative perspective clarifies these tensions, showing how seemingly similar agrarian programs produced triumph in one setting and stalemate or backlash in another.

International networks mattered at every stage. The Comintern offered funds, training, and a repertoire of organizational forms; later, the Sino-Soviet alliance—and its fracture—reshaped strategy, supply lines, and ideological horizons. Aid moved not only through embassies and advisors but also via diasporas, student circuits, smugglers, and publishers who stitched together a subterranean infrastructure of

revolution. Cold War geopolitics amplified both opportunity and risk: wars of decolonization opened space for communist parties to claim the mantle of national liberation, while counterinsurgency technologies and alliances armed their adversaries. Bandung-era nonalignment provided a diplomatic stage on which Asian communists and their competitors contested the meanings of sovereignty, development, and justice.

If insurgencies ride tides, states also make the sea. Colonial and postcolonial regimes deployed emergency laws, surveillance, village guards, and mass detention to hem in the insurgent ocean. Indonesia’s 1965–66 killings mark one extreme of annihilatory violence, but smaller-scale states of exception—labor camp systems, blacklists, and special tribunals—were common across the region. The comparative lens makes visible the contingencies of victory: communist triumphs correlated with wartime state collapse, dense agrarian grievances, effective party schooling and discipline, and coherent external support. Defeats clustered where movements misread the peasant calculus, overexposed themselves in open politics without securing rural bases, or were isolated by international rifts they could not control.

The chapters that follow move between thematic and country-specific analyses. Early chapters trace the transmission of ideas and the formation of cadres; middle chapters situate each movement within its particular social ecology; later chapters compare methods of war-making, political education, gender and religious politics, and the role of culture in sustaining commitment. The concluding chapters return to the central question of uneven outcomes, weighing structural conditions against strategic choice and sheer contingency. Throughout, the book treats revolution not as a singular event but as a long process of institution-building and identity-making, marked by improvisation, internal debate, and moral cost.

A word on sources and scope. This study draws on party documents, memoirs, local newspapers, oral histories, declassified intelligence, and scholarship in multiple languages. Its chronology, 1917–1976, captures the first great cycle of Asian communism—from early organizational experiments to state power, from insurgency to governance, from internationalist optimism to intra-socialist schism. It does not attempt encyclopedic coverage. Rather, it offers a map of connections and contrasts that helps explain how revolutionary projects traveled, took root, and transformed the lives of millions, and why some culminated in state-making while others ended in prisons, graves, or fractured parties.

If there is a single through line, it is that revolutions were made where ideas could be reworked into local moral economies and where organizations earned the right to command sacrifice. That alchemy required far more than slogans: it demanded patient work in villages and factories, the building of trust amid fear, and the capacity to navigate both the promise and peril of international alignment. By placing China, Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, and India in one comparative frame, this book seeks not

only to clarify the past but also to recover the range of futures that once seemed possible in red.

CHAPTER ONE: The October Shock: 1917 and the Asian Revolutionary Imagination

The news reached Asia’s coastal cities and inland trade routes by fits and starts. In late 1917 and early 1918, telegraph wires hummed with fragments: a coup in Petrograd, the storming of the Winter Palace, the decrees on peace and land. In port towns from Batavia to Shanghai, sailors and dockworkers exchanged whispers over crates of tea, cotton, and coal. In Calcutta’s trams and Rangoon’s teashops, students pored over newspapers that arrived days late and sometimes contradictory. For many, the Bolshevik victory seemed at once distant and intimate—an event in a cold northern empire that promised warmth elsewhere.

The audacity of the act was its first lesson. A small disciplined party had seized a vast country, proclaimed new rights, and declared that old empires were finished. For colonized peoples, that message landed with a double force: it was a geopolitical jolt and a methodological hint. The October Revolution suggested that a well-organized minority could remake the state itself, and it promised, at least rhetorically, that the toilers of the world would inherit not just factories but dignity. In Asia’s crowded cities, where colonial hierarchies and merchant capital exacted daily humiliations, this sounded less like doctrine than deliverance.

Yet ideas travel in baggage trains, not clean lines. The Bolsheviks’ words reached Asia filtered through imperial censors, commercial press translators, and intermediaries with their own agendas. Telegrams were decoded in British, French, and Japanese offices, and the most incendiary passages rarely survived intact. Party newsletters, smuggled pamphlets, and missionary printing presses offered partial versions of the new world being announced. Even the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” took on different shades in the mouths of a Bombay textile worker and a Javanese plantation hand. The first shock was not full understanding; it was the sudden existence of a usable example.

The early adopters were often not workers at all but teachers, clerks, and journalists who worked in colonial institutions yet felt the sting of their ceilings. In India, a generation raised on the Indian National Congress’s petitions found in the Bolshevik example a more confrontational repertoire. In Vietnam, French-educated students in Hanoi and Saigon saw in Lenin’s theses on self-determination a counterpoint to the “civilizing mission.” In Indonesia, where the Ethical Policy had promised reform but delivered surveillance, the success in Petrograd suggested that promises alone were worthless without power. For all their diversity, these circles asked a common question: could a party built in Asia repeat the trick?

Lenin’s own writings provided a bridge. His 1920 theses on the national and colonial questions argued that communists in the colonies should support “national revolutionary movements” while building independent class organizations. This was a delicate balance: back anti-imperial struggle without dissolving into bourgeois nationalism. For activists searching for a language to link local grievances to international revolution, the guidance was invaluable. It legitimized alliances while insisting on political independence. Even when the theses were summarized inaccurately in distant newspapers, their core proposition—that anti-imperialism and class politics could be yoked—set minds to work.

The grammar of the new revolution also offered practical forms. The soviet, as a council of delegates, looked dangerously similar to existing trade unions and student associations; it could be imitated or adapted without elaborate invention. The idea of a disciplined, centralized party—opaque to outsiders but tightly knit within—was appealing to movements long accustomed to British or French surveillance. The combination of clandestine cells and open fronts promised a way to operate under repression while still speaking to broader publics. In this period before the term “communist” became a strictly policed label, experimentation was possible.

The European Civil War that followed 1917 mattered as much as the revolution itself. The Russian Civil War, and the interventions by foreign powers, convinced many that revolution would always be met by counterrevolution. In Asia, that lesson echoed across colonial borders. British officials in India watched developments in Russia with alarm and tightened sedition laws. French police in Indochina compiled lists of “Bolshevik-leaning” students. Japanese authorities, meanwhile, saw opportunities: the collapse of the Tsarist empire opened new markets and spheres of influence in Manchuria and Siberia. The Bolshevik victory did not produce uniform fear; some regimes saw room to maneuver.

At the same time, a younger generation of revolutionaries-in-waiting encountered a new vocabulary. Terms like “proletariat,” “imperialism,” and “mass line” entered the lexicon of urban intelligentsia and, gradually, of village organizers. Not everyone understood these terms the same way; indeed, the murkiness allowed them to travel. A textile worker in Bombay might imagine the proletariat as a local caste-and-skill hierarchy; a peasant in the Red River Delta might hear “imperialism” as French tax collectors and the corvée. The word’s slipperiness was not a bug but a feature: it let diverse constituencies hear their own grievances in a global story.

The calendar itself was transformed. May Day, previously marked in scattered labor rallies, took on new meaning after 1917 as a global day of working-class solidarity. In cities across Asia, small processions began to carry red flags alongside national colors. The timing and themes of these events varied: in Japan, May Day emerged cautiously amid wartime controls; in India, it blended with discussions about swaraj and workers’

rights; in China, it became a rallying point for fledgling socialist societies. The October anniversary—celebrated later as Revolution Day—offered another occasion to dramatize the possibility of rule by the toilers.

One overlooked channel of transmission was the world of shipping and ports. Sailors, stokers, and clerks moved between Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Kobe, carrying not only goods but newsletters and rumors. A seaman’s letter could find its way into a student dormitory in Batavia; a Malay-language handbill might reach a Chinese guild hall in Penang. These maritime networks were less institutional than the Comintern but often faster. They stitched together an archipelago of sympathy where news of the Bolshevik victory could be refracted through local concerns—wages on the wharf, the price of rice, a head tax that was suddenly due.

Print culture made the shock legible. Newspapers like *The Communist* and *The Liberator* carried reports, while Chinese-language journals in Shanghai translated excerpts from Lenin. In India, journals such as *The Socialist* and little magazines in Bengal circulated discussions on the Russian example. Across the straits, the Indonesian press—subject to Dutch censorship—nonetheless printed pieces about social reform that pointed readers toward radical solutions. These publications often avoided explicit terms like “Bolshevik” to slip past censors, but their admiration for a successful revolt against empire was thinly veiled.

Relief and humanitarian efforts also carried ideas. Famine in Soviet Russia drew appeals for aid, and some Asian activists supported these campaigns as acts of international solidarity. More than charity was at stake; participation linked local groups to a global cause and offered training in organizing and logistics. It also forced practical questions: How do you raise funds under colonial scrutiny? How do you transport supplies when authorities distrust your motives? In answering these, activists developed skills that would later serve underground cells—collecting dues, managing contacts, maintaining secrecy while working in public.

The Bolshevik promise of self-determination resonated in places where empire refused even the appearance of equality. In Korea, under Japanese rule, the idea that a revolution could overturn colonial hierarchies found eager listeners among students and Christian reformers. In the Philippines, discussions about independence took on new contours as some activists debated whether the American-backed regime could be challenged through mass politics or only through more confrontational methods. Even in distant Burma, the news from Russia entered debates about the future of the colonial state, fueling cautious talk of worker-peasant alliances.

The early 1920s saw the first concrete steps from imagination to organization. Small Marxist circles formed in cities where printers, teachers, and lawyers met in teahouses and apartments. In China, the study societies that would become the Communist Party debated whether Lenin’s strategy could apply to a semi-colonial country. In Vietnam,

the Youth Revolutionary Association—later the Indochinese Communist Party—began to assemble a cadre of organizers. In India, socialist groups within the broader nationalist movement wrestled with how to maintain class politics without isolating themselves. In Indonesia, activists experimented with unions in plantation zones and ports. In Korea, exiles in Shanghai and Moscow sought paths to combine national liberation and social revolution.

Not all early adopters embraced the Bolshevik model wholesale. Some socialists in India emphasized parliamentary tactics and alliances with liberal nationalists, seeing the Russian path as too radical for their context. Others in Japan looked toward a gradual, legal labor movement. Indonesian activists debated whether to work inside the Sarekat Islam or build independent organizations. These differences mattered, but they were animated by the same spark: the October Revolution had made alternative futures imaginable. Whether one favored a long road or a quick march, the question had changed from “Is reform possible?” to “Under what conditions could revolution succeed?”

The promise of land reform was particularly potent in agrarian societies. Bolshevik decrees abolishing private ownership captured imaginations among tenants and sharecroppers, even when details were poorly understood. In parts of China and Vietnam, bandit gangs and secret societies began to speak a new language of social justice, folding Bolshevik ideas into older traditions of peasant revolt. In India’s countryside, where caste and land relations structured daily life, the notion that “land to the tiller” could be law rather than aspiration altered the horizon of politics. In Korea’s villages, the idea that tenants could become owners resonated amid high rents and usurious debts.

Cultural figures played an outsized role in translating the October shock into local textures. Poets in Bengal wrote about the “dawn in the north,” while Japanese writers experimented with proletarian literature. Chinese dramatists staged plays about the struggles of workers, and Indonesian painters sketched scenes of plantation labor that hinted at larger transformations. These cultural products carried ideas beyond political circles, embedding them in emotional registers—hope, anger, pride—that lectures and pamphlets could not always reach. They also gave the revolution an aesthetic, a look and sound that made it feel near rather than distant.

The October Revolution also complicated the relationship between religion and revolution. In Soviet Central Asia, Bolsheviks confronted Islam with policies that mixe d anti-clericalism and modernization. This encounter sent ripples across Muslim communities in India and Indonesia, where debates over secularism, faith, and social justice took on new urgency. Some religious reformers saw in the Bolshevik emphasis on equality a potential ally; others feared atheism as a threat. In practice, communist organizers would later navigate these waters by distinguishing between religious institutions and the beliefs of the masses, but the early years set the tone for these

debates.

Security services adapted quickly. British intelligence in India, French Sûreté in Indochina, and Dutch authorities in the East Indies compiled reports on Bolshevik influence, often with more paranoia than precision. They infiltrated unions, opened mail, and arrested printers. The early crackdowns had a paradoxical effect: they forced activists to become more disciplined. The shift from open clubs to secret cells was accelerated by repression, and the skills of evasion—safe houses, codes, lookouts—entered the repertoire of Asian leftists. In this sense, the October shock was as much a lesson in organization as in ideology.

The language of class proved both powerful and slippery. In colonial settings, “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” did not map neatly onto existing social categories. In India, caste complicated the picture; some “backward” castes were workers but not always identified as such. In Indonesia, ethnic divisions between Javanese and Outer Island workers made simple class appeals insufficient. In China, urban workers were a small minority relative to the peasantry, forcing a reckoning with the urban-centric model. Yet the terms provided a framework for seeing society in a new way, linking diverse grievances to a single narrative of exploitation and emancipation.

The October Revolution’s timing intersected with other regional crises. The 1918–19 influenza pandemic hit Asia hard, exposing state neglect and generating popular anger; in some places, mutual aid groups that formed to fight the disease later became political organizations. The post–World War I economic dislocation disrupted trade routes and raised prices, making workers and peasants more receptive to radical proposals. The May Fourth Movement in China, though not explicitly communist at first, created a fertile intellectual environment for debates that would soon turn toward Marxism. In Vietnam, postwar unrest and the failure of reform within the colonial system pushed younger activists toward more radical solutions.

By 1921, the first formal communist parties began to appear. The Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai, drawing on study societies that had absorbed Marxist texts and the Russian example. The Indochinese Communist Party, led by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later Ho Chi Minh), emerged from networks that linked Paris, Hong Kong, and southern China. The Korean Communist Party organized in exile and at home, though its early years were marred by factionalism. In India, the Communist Party formed within the shadow of the nationalist movement, navigating an uneasy path between mass politics and elite negotiations. In Indonesia, the PKI began as a small party but quickly developed links to unions and mass organizations.

The Comintern’s formal role began to take shape. At its Second Congress in 1920, Lenin laid out guidelines for colonial and national questions, and the formation of “Friends of the Russian People” societies across Asia created channels for communication and funding. The Comintern’s training schools—most famously the

Communist University of the Toilers of the East—educated a generation of Asian cadres in Marxism-Leninism, organizing techniques, and international discipline. These institutions offered more than instruction; they built personal bonds that would later facilitate aid, advice, and sometimes friction.

Revolutionary time took on its own rhythm. The Bolsheviks used the Gregorian calendar but kept revolutionary anniversaries, creating a new ritual cycle. In Asia, activists adopted the practice of marking key dates—May Day, October Revolution Day, International Women's Day—on their own calendars, often in defiance of colonial authorities. These rituals built community and sustained morale. They also provided cover: a public meeting to celebrate a holiday could double as a planning session. The performance of revolution—flags, songs, speeches—was as important as the theory behind it.

There was humor in the early days, too. A student in Calcutta might joke that his landlord feared Bolsheviks more than the British; a clerk in Batavia could wink when he slipped a banned pamphlet under a stack of official documents. The idea of revolution carried a certain glamour, and young activists sometimes adopted the look—shirts rolled up, earnest talk of "the masses"—with a theatrical flair. This lightness, while fleeting, mattered: it made a daunting project seem possible, even exciting, and bound loose networks together with camaraderie.

Debates over strategy were fierce even at this early stage. Should parties focus on organizing workers in colonial ports and railways, or should they cultivate links with peasants in the countryside? How much independence should socialist groups maintain within broader nationalist coalitions? Were urban uprisings the path to power, or was a longer, more patient work among rural majorities required? The Bolshevik example pointed to urban seizure and the role of a disciplined party, but Asia's social structures posed different problems. These arguments—productive and often unresolved—would recur across the region for decades.

Early collaborations across borders were informal but significant. Vietnamese exiles in China met Chinese students; Korean revolutionaries in Shanghai linked up with Japanese socialists fleeing police pressure. These personal connections mattered as much as formal directives. A shared meal, a map drawn on a napkin, a letter of introduction—such small acts laid the groundwork for later institutional ties. In the absence of reliable international channels, these webs of trust allowed information, resources, and ideas to move. They foreshadowed the later networks that would sustain insurgency and state-building.

For many activists, the October Revolution also offered a model of leadership. The image of Lenin as both theorist and man of action appealed to those who had grown impatient with endless debate. Reading Lenin's pamphlets, even in imperfect translations, gave a sense of method: analyze the concrete conditions, identify allies

and enemies, build the party, seize the moment. The style was crisp and confident, a contrast to the hesitations of older nationalist leaders. It taught cadres to think strategically and to subordinate personal ambition to collective discipline—qualities that would prove essential under repression.

Not every lesson was salutary. The Bolshevik embrace of violence and repression alarmed some socialists who preferred a democratic path. Early debates about the “dictatorship of the proletariat” raised fears that communist parties might become as authoritarian as the regimes they opposed. These concerns were not trivial; they shaped the choices of activists who eventually joined nationalist or social democratic movements instead. Yet even for those who chose a different road, the October shock set the terms of debate. No political program could ignore the existence of the Soviet Union or the challenge it posed to empire and capital.

The religious landscape was also affected. Christian reformers in Korea and Burma considered whether the Bolshevik emphasis on equality could be reconciled with their own visions of social gospel. Buddhist and Hindu thinkers weighed the implications of materialist philosophy for moral and spiritual life. In Indonesia and India, debates about atheism and secularism intensified. These discussions were not abstract; they would influence how parties approached communities where faith was central to identity. The October Revolution did not resolve these questions but ensured they would be part of the political conversation.

Press censorship made early communication both risky and creative. Activists used coded language, allegory, and euphemism to evade detection. Terms like “northern lights” or “new dawn” could signal approval without naming the Bolsheviks. Humor helped: a joke about a “storm in the north” could convey excitement while maintaining plausible deniability. These strategies of communication—part practical, part poetic—created a shared culture of resistance. They also prepared cadres for the work of building clandestine networks.

The first generation of Asian communists thus came of age in a moment when revolution was both an idea and a practice. They learned from successes and failures in Russia, debated the meaning of Marxism-Leninism for their own societies, and built small organizations that would soon face severe tests. The October shock did not produce uniformity; it multiplied experiments. Some would be crushed, others would transform themselves, and a few would eventually take power. What they shared was the conviction that empire and exploitation were not eternal, that another order was possible, and that disciplined organization could bring that future within reach.

In the years immediately following 1917, the contours of the Asian left began to take shape: study circles turned into parties; ports and teahouses became schools of revolution; ideas traveled faster than armies. The October Revolution did not hand Asia a blueprint; it handed it a challenge and a method. The challenge was to remake

society in the interests of workers and peasants; the method was a party that could think, plan, and act. These early lessons—caught in telegrams, whispered in teahouses, printed in clandestine pamphlets—would be tested in the fires of colonial rule, civil war, and occupation, and they would leave an indelible mark on the course of twentieth-century Asia.

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