

Fellow Travelers

Extreme positions of all kinds often attract adherents who for one reason or another cannot commit publicly or absolutely to “the cause.” Perhaps public commitment would jeopardize their careers, their preferred style of life, their family, or even their lives. In no modern case are there more—or more vivid—instances of this mixture of militancy and discretion than among sympathizers with communism. In certain instances espionage resulted from such collisions of public and private values, as in the case of Kim Philby and the other Cambridge spies in England during the 1930s and 1940s. In others, evasion and prevarication, sometimes combined with drastic ideological evolution rightward, was the result, as times or circumstances changed. But it is common for such people, known in political cases as “fellow travelers,” to live for long periods of time on the uncertain fringes of commitment.

The term fellow traveler (*poputchik*, *compagnon de route*, or *Mitläufer*) assumed something like its modern meaning when in *Literature and Revolution* (1923), Leon Trotsky attached it to the generation of left-wing Russian writers who were sympathetic to the Russian Revolution but not committed to Bolshevism in any deep way. Writers like Boris Pilnyak, Vsevolod Ivanov, Nikolai Kliuev, and Alexander Blok were attracted to the revolution (or the “victorious Revolution,” as Trotsky wrote acidly from exile some years later) for a variety of reasons. Some, like the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and other futurists, were acting out an aesthetic revolt; others were adherents of a peasant rebellion that accepted the proletariat as the linchpin of the revolution only *faute de mieux*; some were consumed by the excitement of it all; and still others simply bore witness to the most remarkable event of their time.

In Trotsky’s polemic on literature and social class, written early in the Soviet period, fellow traveler was a grudgingly favorable term. The proletariat would one day produce a real working-class literature, but only after it had been properly educated and trained. Sympathetic bourgeois writers would have to do for now in the vital matter of glorifying the revolution of 1917 to the world. Many of Trotsky’s more radical Soviet opponents objected to such an implicit, if partial and instrumental, acceptance of bourgeois writers.

Under Stalin, however, the meaning and import of fellow traveler underwent a major shift. Fellow traveling

by Russian writers was no longer permitted; nothing but all-out enthusiasm for Soviet communism would do from the motherland’s own. The fellow travelers with whom the government was concerned were foreigners. Influential foreigners could help in many ways to spread communism across the face of the globe. They could proclaim, as the American Lincoln Steffens did after returning from the Soviet Union, “I have been over to the future and it works.” It was hoped in Moscow that they might prepare the way for more resolute Marxist revolutionaries who would eventually take their places. For the present, they could at least pressure their bourgeois governments to adopt more pro-Soviet policies.

Fellow traveling was far from constant or uniform over the duration of the Soviet Union. There were two major upsurges, and then, during the Cold War, an up-and-down pattern largely in the direction of decline. The first wave came in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution and was dominated by intellectuals, although more ordinary socialists and trade unionists were involved as well, especially in Europe. The second and rather more important wave came after the stock market crash of 1929, which convinced many Europeans and Americans that capitalism had failed, and that socialism, along more or less Soviet lines, was the wave of the future. During the radical 1930s, large numbers of Europeans and Americans adopted positions of sympathy and support for Soviet policies as well as the system itself. Some joined the Communist Party, and some did not. Many such people, especially in the United States, eventually suffered damage to their careers for their flirtation with the party. At the dawn of the Cold War, the political center of gravity in the West moved rather quickly to the Right. Many leftists were carried toward the center by the tide; a few resisted; and an even smaller number undertook a variety of services for the Soviet Union, including espionage.

A complex mixture of blame and sympathy was the lot of the fellow traveler, depending on the politics of the critic. For conservatives, the fellow traveler was a fool and a dupe. They were wont to lay emphasis on the secrecy often displayed by supporters of communism in the capitalist world and the possibility that a fellow traveler might be—or become—a Soviet agent. As the Cold War developed, points of view that had seemed merely progressive in the 1930s began to appear “anti-American” or even treasonous in the changed world. Fellow traveler quickly became a wholly negative term in this atmosphere. This benighted individual was a fool for believing

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in far Left points of view and a dupe for believing that there was an idealistic dimension to communism. This person was also regarded as cowardly, insincere, or duplicitous for not embracing his or her cause openly.

Among leftists and liberals the take on fellow traveling was different. There were many sympathizers with communism in Europe, the United States, and around the world. Everyone knew that. But where was the borderline across which one stepped from sympathy into fellow traveling? Was Jean-Paul Sartre a passionate sympathizer with communism or a contemptible fellow traveler? Conservatives tended to see all sympathizers as virtual fellow travelers, while liberals and leftists were likely to separate the categories. The liberal historian David Caute saw most fellow travelers as progressives and modernizers, heirs to the (generally pre-Marxist) Enlightenment. To be sure their view of the Soviet Union was naive and utopian—deluded even, steeped in rationalism and scientism, and out of touch with ordinary life. But the imputation of evil, treachery, or the intent to do harm was largely absent. Among leftists, the fellow traveler was not generally regarded as an epicurean devotee of vicarious violence, not the person who drove Stalin's getaway car and then claimed innocence of the crimes. There could even be an element of the tragic about generous-minded progressives who had believed too long and fervently in the Soviet Union. These differing views of course expressed larger political differences between the Left and the Right in the intellectual world surrounding the Soviet Union.

It is somewhat easier to see the fellow travelers of the immediate postrevolutionary period as guilty of little more than naive enthusiasm for the new world promised by the Russian revolutionaries. Pro-Soviet sympathies carried far less baggage in the early 1920s than they had acquired a decade or two later. There was little or no explaining to be done about the gulag, although it had already begun to grow. Stalin and Stalinism lay in the future.

"Throughout the twentieth century," wrote François Furet, "communism has been like a house that each generation has gone in or out of according to circumstances." The proclamation of the so-called Popular Front policy of the Soviet Union in 1935, six years after the stock market crash, heightened pro-Soviet feelings among leftists in Europe and the United States, and brought them some reciprocity from the socialist motherland. Party membership and fellow traveling rose dramatically. In France, the romantic, antinationalist writer Romain Rolland, never

actually a party member, visited Stalin in 1935, supported the purges, and was still backing the party at the time of his death in 1944. André Gide's fellow traveling at least was confined to a brief period around the middle of the 1930s. According to Furet, Gide "left France [to visit the Soviet Union] a fellow traveler [and] returned comparing Stalin to Hitler." Stephen Spender's views in England followed the same trajectory. As an Oxford undergraduate he announced his conversion to communism in the *Daily Worker* in 1936, but little more than a decade later he contributed to that classic anthology of disillusioned ex-Communists, *The God That Failed*. Despite inner doubts, Anna Seghers and Bertolt Brecht never repudiated a clear commitment to communism in Germany, but Lion Feuchtwanger and Heinrich Mann were classic fellow travelers.

The events of the early Cold War made fellow traveling more difficult. The Communist coup in Czechoslovakia (1948), the East Berlin uprising (1953), Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the Hungarian Revolt (1956), and the Prague Spring (1968) made strong pro-Soviet opinions in the West seem more and more quixotic at best, and treasonous at worst. Only the young radicals of the 1960s and their mentors, like Herbert Marcuse, changed the tone, but only briefly. And their basic position was not to rehabilitate the Soviet Union but rather merely to assert that bad as it was, it was no worse than the United States. The end of the Soviet Union made the subject of who the fellow travelers were and why they behaved as they did something largely for historians, but scholarly acrimony persists to this day.

See also Anticommunism; Antifascism; Partisans of Peace; Propaganda, Communist.

FURTHER READING

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