William Morris and the USSR

Dennis Bartels

Differences and similarities between the historical development of the former Soviet Union and William Morris’s views on the possible trajectory of a revolutionary transition from capitalism to state socialism to communism are explored in this article. I suggest that Morris’s analysis of imperialism can be used to explain the gap which arose after World War II between living standards in the Soviet Union and the West. Many Soviet intellectuals apparently did not see this gap as product of imperialism, but as a failure of socialism. This contributed to the ideological crisis which precipitated the demise of the USSR. At the same time, neither the Soviet Union nor the West developed the sort of eco-friendly technology envisioned by Morris as a precursor to full-fledged state socialism.

In his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere (NfN)*, Morris contrasted Victorian industrial capitalism with his vision of a communist England whose main features are equality, fellowship, and attractive labour. While individuals live and work in small communities governed by majority rule, there is no hierarchical organisation of labour, and there is no coercion by a centralised state. Labour is attractive because a combination of physical and artistic activity is harnessed to socially useful projects in sustainable, sylvan communities reminiscent of medieval England. The disagreeable but necessary precursor to communism was state socialism, which involved, among other things, rebuilding an economy devastated by revolution and civil war, and rapid development of productive technology in order to provide working people with sufficient leisure time to begin to enjoy the pleasures of life. In *NfN* Morris characterised state socialism as bringing a ‘dull level of utilitarian comfort’ which temporarily dimmed the prospect of a further transition to communism.

Early Marxists, sometimes using ethnological work by Lewis Henry Morgan, located European societies on a socio-cultural evolutionary continuum which began with ‘primitive’ communism, then passed through slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. It was hoped that this progression would culminate in communism. A similar progression was presented by Morris and his collaborator, E. Belfort Bax, in their series, *Socialism from the Root Up*, published in *The Commonweal* between 1886 and 1888. Morris believed that working people in medieval times and in some non-Western cultures, despite class oppression and a relatively low level of technological development, had integrated the decorative arts into their everyday lives to a much greater extent than was possible in capitalist society, where the commodification of all aspects of life destroyed traditional arts and crafts. From Morris’s point of view, working people in medieval Europe or in pre-feudal Scandinavia and Iceland were less alienated than working people in supposedly ‘higher’ stages of socio-cultural evolution. This is related to Morris’s view that the sensual pleasures of ‘barbarism’ had been deadened by commercialism, and accounts for his repeated and scornful references to capitalist ‘civilisation’ (see below). Like Marx and Engels, Morris
condemned the destruction of traditional culture by capitalism. In NfN he wrote, ‘the appetite of the World-Market grew with what it fed on: the countries within the ring of “civilisation” (that is, organized misery) were glutted with the abortions of the market, and force and fraud were used unsparring to “open up” countries outside that pale…’.

Morris’s analysis of imperialism was heavily influenced by Frederick Engels’ view that the supremacy of British capitalism in the world market between 1850 and 1875... gave birth to a skilled aristocracy of labour protected by strong Trade Unions which coexisted with a large underclass who lived in poverty and abject misery. Even so, most working people, Engels suggested, benefited in some ways, at least temporarily, from Britain’s dominant industrial position. These developments contributed to the decline of the Chartist and socialist movements. Nicholas Salmon writes that Morris was also influenced by an 1888 article by Bax, who argued that imperialistic expansion would greatly increase commercial access to markets and cheap raw materials, labour and agricultural products, as well as providing new territories for emigrants. This would likely prolong the life of capitalism ‘in a slightly changed form even for another century’.

Morris saw industrial capitalism as a system of commercial war, and suggested that European wars were ultimately motivated by a quest for new markets. In an 1886 lecture Morris said, ‘we are not contented with safe little wars against savage tribes with whom no one but ourselves wanted to meddle, but will even risk wars which may or indeed must in the long run embroil us with nations who have huge armies who no more lack “the resources of civilization” than ourselves’. In 1887, Morris wrote that a large-scale European war would, in the short-term, retard the socialist movement. He believed, however, that post-war economic dislocation might hasten revolution, and referred to revolution as the shadow behind ‘brilliant “respectable” war’.

Morris’s expectation of war between the major imperialist powers was not reflected in his fictional account in NfN of a socialist revolution in England in the mid-twentieth century. In contrast, the Bolshevik Revolution was, to a large extent, based on popular resentment of the Tsarist state’s continued participation in World War I. A popular Bolshevik slogan was ‘peace, land, bread!’ Lenin argued that World War I was imperialist because it was necessitated by division of the entire world into colonies or otherwise dominated by the major colonial powers. Colonial expansion by a particular power could only be achieved at the expense of others, and finance capitalism required constant expansion in order to avoid crisis. Consequently, war between major imperialist powers was inevitable unless it could be prevented by the concerted action of the international proletariat. This view is similar in important respects to that of Morris who warned socialists ‘to avoid any possibility of their being dragged into a false position by the recrudescence of jingoism which is quite certain to be one result of even the advancing shadow of a European war’.

John Crump has suggested that there are significant similarities between the workmen’s committees which carry out the socialist revolution in NfN, and the workers’ councils, or Soviets, which emerged in Russia during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Christopher Hill writes, ‘the Soviets, assemblies of delegates
from factories and working-class organisations, were the only spontaneous democratic institutions in [Russia] ... The rough-and-ready soviet methods [involved] election by show of hands in public meetings, with a right of recall, and indirect election to higher bodies ...'18 Morris saw the mission of the Socialist League as promoting a clear vision of communist society among workers. This, he hoped, would inspire anti-capitalist revolution. He saw parliamentary and trade union activity as diversions from this goal, and strongly argued that socialists should avoid them.19 In 1886, however, he urged different socialist groups to join the Socialist League in order to achieve unity in anti-capitalist struggle. He wrote,

... when the principles and tactics held [by different socialist groups] are practically the same, it seems to me a great mistake for socialist bodies to hold aloof from each other ... Habitual and organized intercourse is necessary to the [socialist] education I have been speaking of; no independence is sacrificed by this intercourse, and propaganda is made much easier by it. I appeal ... to all who agree with us, individuals, local bodies, or central ones, to give up the mere name of independence in order to attain its reality, and to join our League so that we may show a firm front to the common enemy in these troublous yet hopeful times that are coming on us.20

The sort of loose organisation that Morris proposed seems far removed from Bolshevik democratic centralism. In democratic centralist parties, membership is largely restricted to those with proven dedication to the party and its policies. At periodic party congresses, party policy is debated and adopted, and a central executive committee is elected. Between congresses, members submerge their political differences and follow the tactical directives of the central committee. This kind of organisation allows a party to present a united front to adversaries and facilitates concerted, possibly clandestine action. The 'Combined Workers' in the revolutionary struggle portrayed in NfN seem to have democratic centralist organisation.21 The extent to which it needed to be retained during the post-revolutionary phase of state socialism was not discussed by Morris.

Lenin and the early Bolsheviks adopted democratic centralist organisation because they were compelled to operate underground in Tsarist Russia, where organized political opposition to the state was illegal.22 Democratic centralism was retained after the revolution in order to insure unity and discipline during the Civil War (1918–1920) which followed the revolution. It was again retained during Stalinist industrialisation and collectivisation and during the Great Patriotic War. And it persisted through the Cold War to the end of the USSR.

Similar to Marx and Engels, Morris also explicitly rejected anarchism, arguing that its emphasis on individual rights would lead to a tyranny of minorities.23 Lenin also rejected the anarchist view that the state should be abolished immediately after a socialist revolution. He wrote, 'we do not at all disagree with the anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as an aim. We maintain that, to achieve this aim, we must make temporary use of the instruments, resources and methods of state power against the exploiters just as a temporary dictatorship of the oppressed class is necessary for the abolition of classes'.24
During the Civil War, Bolshevik forces fought against an anarchist peasant movement led by Nestor Makhno in the Ukraine.\textsuperscript{25}

While there is no threat of foreign intervention during or after the revolution in NfN, the USSR was, from its beginning, threatened by external enemies. The Allied powers and Japan sent troops to assist Tsarist forces in an attempt to overthrow the Soviet state during the Civil War. During this period money in the USSR became valueless and Lenin's government resorted to a policy of ‘war communism’ which involved confiscation of agricultural produce to feed urban workers and the Red Army. In the absence of wages, working people received food vouchers.\textsuperscript{26} Soviet ceramics from this period sometimes bore the slogan, ‘he who does not work shall not eat’.\textsuperscript{27}

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national and ethnic differences were serious impediments to building an international working class movement. Thus, it was politically important for the Bolsheviks to analyse national and ethnic differences. In 1913 the Bolsheviks published *Marxism and the National Question* where it was argued that nations only arose within the capitalist and socialist stages of socio-cultural evolution.\textsuperscript{28} With the advent of socialism on a world scale, national, racial, and ethnic divisions would become insignificant. This is roughly the situation that Morris sketched in NfN where Guest, the main protagonist, is told,

\[
...\text{the whole system of rival and contending nations which played so great a part in the ‘government’ of the world civilisation has disappeared along with the inequality betwixt man and man in society ... How should it add to ... [cultural] varieties ... to coerce certain families or tribes, often heterogeneous and jarring with one another, into certain artificial and mechanical groups and call them nations? ... whatever quarrels or misunderstandings arise [in *Nowhere*], they seldom take place between people of different race.}\textsuperscript{29}
\]

Morris conceded, however, that the ‘political unit’ in the ‘transitional’ society – that is, state socialist society – would be the nation.\textsuperscript{30} After the revolution and Civil War in Russia, the Bolsheviks sought to eradicate Tsarist policies of national oppression by establishing national territories, administered by previously-suppressed members of ethnic and national groups. Resources were allocated for the development of school books and newspapers in ‘national languages’.\textsuperscript{31} These policies were largely abandoned during the Stalinist period (see below).

In NfN, the revolutionary war lasts about two years, and the necessity to restore the economy ‘forced [people] to work at first almost as hard as they had been used to before the Revolution’.\textsuperscript{32} Tsarist involvement in World War I lasted about four years, and the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War lasted about three years. Production in the Soviet Union did not reach pre-World War I levels until about 1925-26.\textsuperscript{33} In order to rebuild the economy after the Civil War, Lenin's government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, which involved a partial restoration of capitalism. Concessions were granted to foreign investors, and peasants were allowed to hire labour, and to sell agricultural products on the open market.\textsuperscript{34}

Morris also warned against ‘bureaucratic centralisation’\textsuperscript{35} in socialist society,
and argued that revolution ‘cannot mean a change made mechanically and in the teeth of opinion by a group of men who have somehow managed to seize on the executive power for a moment’. This brings to mind Antonio Gramsci’s claim that the Bolshevik Revolution succeeded largely because of an absence of civil society in Tsarist Russia. There were no parliamentary institutions, political parties, legal trade unions, independent mass media, or voluntary organizations which provided an ideological underpinning for the Tsarist state. Consequently, when the Tsarist coercive apparatus floundered during World War I, the Bolsheviks were able to take power in Petrograd by waging what Gramsci characterized as a ‘war of manoeuvre’. He contrasted this to the ‘war of position’ that would be necessary to overcome capitalist hegemony embedded in the institutions of Western European civil society. This is not to say that the Bolshevik Revolution was not popular, or that it was made ‘in the teeth of public opinion’, to use Morris’s phrase. But the absence of civil society after the Revolution meant that the Bolshevik leadership was faced with an unprecedented task. They attempted to create lasting legitimacy for a workers’ state by establishing institutions of civil society. These included the Young Communist League, schools, universities, Soviets, and trade unions. After initial experimentation during the 1920s, these institutions assumed forms during the Stalinist period that persisted until the end of the USSR.

In the late 1920s, Stalin’s faction in the Communist Party won popular support for building ‘socialism in one country’ by arguing that rapid industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture were necessary to deter the imperialist powers from attacking the USSR. In an influential speech in 1931, ten years before the Nazi invasion, Stalin warned that unless the USSR pushed ahead with industrialisation, she would be defeated. Stalinist policy involved purging the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) of cadres with international connections who could potentially compromise state security. It also involved purging nationalistic elements who had been particularly active in the nascent ‘national territories’ set up during the 1920s. It was feared that nationalism might pose a threat to the increasingly powerful centralised state and bureaucracy. There were many victims of these Stalinist purges, some of whom apparently supported the Stalinist goal of building socialism in one country, but were falsely accused of subversion. Many prominent state and Communist Party leaders were executed or sentenced to forced labour for alleged involvement in a Trotskyist-Nazi plot against the USSR. Irrespective of whether this plot was fabricated by the Stalinist leadership, or fabricated by Nazi intelligence agents in order to destabilize the USSR, the atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust that emerged among the Soviet elite during the Stalinist purges is reminiscent of Morris’s characterisation of early socialist politics as a melange of ‘knowledge, discontent, treachery, disappointment, ruin, misery, despair’. In one central respect the state and society that emerged during the Stalinist Five Year Plans resembled Morris’s 1887 characterisation of state socialism: working people, represented by the state, took over ‘all the means of production: that is, credit, railways, mines, factories, shipping, land [and] machinery . . . .’

Morris characterised strong trade unions as components of what Lenin would term a ‘labour aristocracy’ (see below), and he rejected trade unionism as a
socialist tactic. The London dock strike of 1889, however, convinced Morris that a general strike could be an effective political weapon, and in *N/P* a general strike is a major factor in crippling capitalism. But Morris did not specify a role for trade unions in state socialist society. Trade unions were major components of the civil society that was constructed by the Stalinist state. From the 1930s until the end of the USSR, all workers were guaranteed a job, and almost all workers belonged to trade unions. While unions played a major role in determining workplace health and safety standards, they did not have the right to strike: ‘if workers in individual enterprises struck for higher wages or special conditions, goods and privileges would accrue to those in the most strategic industries and undermine the ability of society to realise the overall economic plan’. According to Nicholas Salmon, Morris similarly believed that gains made by striking trade unionists were made at the expense of other segments of the working class.

Morris suggested in 1886 that in a socialist society, the reward of ‘genius’ should not exceed that given for ordinary work. By contrast, in *State and Revolution* (1918) Lenin suggested that the ‘lower’ socialist phase of communism would be organised according to the socialist principle, ‘an equal amount of product for an equal amount of labour’. While this policy could not be implemented during the period of war communism, pay differentials were adopted during the NEP, and they persisted through consolidation of control of all sectors by the Stalinist state during the 1930s, up to the end of the USSR. The socialist principle – ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their work’ – was interpreted in the former USSR to mean that those who contributed the most to society were to receive proportionately high rewards from society, and ‘contributions’ were narrowly interpreted in terms of material production. Thus, teachers and physicians earned less than skilled industrial workers, such as experienced machine-tool operators. The most highly-paid workers received, on average, about two or three times as much as the lowest-paid workers. But pay differentials in the former USSR may have meant less than they do in the West. There was a limited range of consumer goods, and many people could afford to buy most products that were available. Since charges for rent, heat, and electricity were almost entirely borne by the state, money could be saved for food and larger purchases. The role that money played in the former USSR was perhaps similar to Morris’s expectation that ‘money will be used [in socialist society] if necessary, as it may be at first, but will only be used as counters for representing so much labour’. Not surprisingly, money is completely absent in communist Nowhere.

Perhaps more significant than pay differentials in the former USSR were power differentials correlated with levels of education. By the 1970s, intellectuals – that is, people with higher education – made up a disproportionately large part of the ruling Communist Party, and thus enjoyed a disproportionately large share of political power.

Marx argued that the ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital which preceded the industrial revolution was based, among other things, on the Atlantic slave trade and on the plundering of Asia. Morris and Bax reiterated this position in *Socialism from the Root Up*. Lenin, like Morris, was influenced by Engels’ view that super-exploitation of colonies would allow European capitalist classes to create ‘labour aristocracies’ which could be diverted from socialism.
was implicit in Stalin’s 1928 characterisation of the economic advantages enjoyed by British imperialism: ‘you know that for hundreds of years Britain collected capital from all her colonies and from all parts of the world, and was able in this way to make additional investments in her industry . . . One respect in which our country differs from the capitalist countries is that it cannot and must not engage in colonial robbery, or the plundering of the other countries in general’.56

Despite the economic advantages conferred by imperialism, the West stagnated during the depression of the 1930s while the Soviets achieved full employment and massive industrial growth. But after colonial and neo-colonial exploitation expanded after World War II, the CPSU persisted in comparing Soviet economic development to the U.S. and British economies, when it might have been more appropriately compared to that of Third World capitalist countries such as India. Under Khrushchev’s leadership, there was much unrealistic rhetoric about the advent of communism.57 In light of the failure of repeated post-war predictions by the CPSU of a socialist triumph after a terminal crisis of capitalism, it is perhaps not surprising that many Soviet intellectuals supported Gorbachev’s policies which resulted in the dismantling of Soviet institutions.

By the 1980s most Soviet intellectuals had learned about ‘capitalist exploitation’ in compulsory classes on Marxism-Leninism, but, like young people in Nowhere, they could not understand its severity because they had never experienced it directly.58 They seemed unaware that their relatively privileged and secure positions were a result not only of their personal academic achievements, but of state policies that allowed surplus produced by working people to be allocated to academic and scientific institutions, and to be used to maintain an extensive social safety net. In addition, many Soviet intellectuals associated Soviet socialism with Stalinist purges, and saw it as a barrier to the inclusion of Russia in the mainstream of ‘civilised’ European intellectual and technological development. These factors perhaps led them to see the middle-class living standards of the West as a product of capitalist dynamism rather than the spoils of imperialism. Such circumstances can be related to the premonition of Ellen in NfN, who says, ‘times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse toward change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been done before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid’.59 This passage locates the danger to communism not in over-bureaucratization, democratic centralism, economic inefficiency, or national strife, but in ideological factors. And in the former USSR, the arbiters of ideology were intellectuals. It is perhaps not surprising that some of the major characters in NfN are sometimes annoyed with people who delight in reading or writing fiction about the capitalist past.60

Morris saw the productive technology of state socialist society as a legacy of capitalism. He expected that rapid technological development in the ‘lower stage’ of communism would eventually reduce the work day to about four hours.61 Morris’s contemporary, the German Social Democratic leader August Bebel, expected that the work day might be less than three hours in a socialist society.62 After the evolution of a state socialist leisure society, Morris envisioned a spontaneous movement toward communal, physical labour which integrated the decorative arts. This transition to communism would not, however, involve a
wholesale rejection of industrial technology. Even though people in Nowhere prefer to ride horses and to harvest hay with scythes, heavy loads are hauled on canals by ‘force barges’ powered by engines which do not burn fossil fuels. But the productive technology of the West, let alone that of the post-revolutionary Tsarist empire, was nowhere near this level of development. Nor were the highly-efficient, eco-friendly technologies in Nowhere under development in the capitalist Britain of 1952, the year of *NfN*’s revolution. Instead, fossil fuel and related industries burgeoned in the 1950s, both in the USSR and in the capitalist world. Unfortunately, Morris’s timetable for pre-revolutionary and ‘state socialist’ technological developments did not match reality.

The contradictions which Marx, Engels, and Morris saw as undermining capitalism are still at work. The quest for short-term profits has brought environmental degradation which threatens not only capitalism, but the entire human species. It seems increasingly clear that capitalism is incapable of recognising what Marx referred to as the necessity of bequeathing the earth in an improved state for successive generations. More specifically, greenhouse gas emissions caused by the combustion of fossil fuels are changing the earth’s climate and bringing an increased frequency of extreme weather events which are beginning to undermine the process of capital accumulation. This has compelled development of ‘clean’ renewable energy technologies, even though their propagation is now impeded by the political allies of fossil fuel and related industries in the George W. Bush Administration. It seems unlikely, however, that segments of the capitalist classes will be able indefinitely to block working people’s access to energy technologies based on solar, wind, tidal, geothermal, and other sources of energy reminiscent of the force barges in *NfN*. It is interesting to note in this context Bebel’s suggestion that solar and geothermal energy could provide power in the socialist society of the future. While renewable and eco-friendly technologies were not widely produced and propagated in the USSR, socialist Cuba has made notable advances in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Automobiles have been largely replaced by bicycles in Havana, and large-scale use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers has been largely replaced by organic farming and biological pest controls throughout Cuba. This surely would have pleased Morris.

The threat of anthropogenic environmental catastrophe has posed the question of how eco-friendly technologies might be widely produced and propagated. Morris believed that this could only occur within socialist relations of production. If he was correct, the experience of the former USSR and contemporary Cuba may provide useful lessons for present and future struggles to achieve eco-socialism.

NOTES

1 Information about the former USSR comes not only from published sources, but from my experience of life in Moscow and Leningrad during three research trips during the 1980s to learn about Soviet policy toward northern indigenous
peoples. My research in the USSR was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.


3 *News from Nowhere*, p. 114.

4 See Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972 [1884]).


7 *News from Nowhere*, p. 80.


9 *Socialism from the Root Up*, chapter XXII, ‘Socialism Militant’ [part 1], *Commonweal* 4:113 (10 March 1888), p. 76.

10 ibid., p. 76.


16 ‘Words of Forecast for 1887’, p. 9.


21 *News from Nowhere*, pp. 93-94.

22 *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, pp. 17-34.
27 Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, Revolutionary Ceramics (NY: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 32.
28 J. Stalin, Marxism and the National Question (NY: International Publishers, 1942 [1913]).
29 News from Nowhere, pp. 72-73.
30 Socialism from the Root Up, chapter 23, ‘Socialism Triumphant’ [part 1], Commonweal 4:121 (5 May 1888), pp. 140-41.
31 For examples of how this policy was implemented among aboriginal groups of northern and far eastern Siberia, see Dennis Bartels and Alice L. Bartels, When the North was Red, Aboriginal Education in Soviet Siberia (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995).
32 News from Nowhere, p. 111.
39 See Victor Zaslavsky and Robert Brym, Soviet-Jewish Emigration and Soviet Nationality Policy (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), p. 17; see also When the North was Red, pp. 50-54.
42 News from Nowhere, p. 88.
45 News from Nowhere, p. 103.


49 *State and Revolution*, pp. 84-85.


57 *Heroic Struggle, Bitter Defeat*, p. 150.

58 *News from Nowhere*, p. 56.

59 Ibid., pp. 167-68.

60 Ibid., p. 18; p. 129.


63 *News from Nowhere*, p. 140.


