**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**How Important Is Communism in World History? (Chapter 21)**

**SLIDE 21.1**

Should *Ways of the World* devote a whole chapter to Communism?

**SLIDE 21.2**

A quarter century on from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the question of communism’s place in a history of the last century is open to debate. Since 1990 most of the communist world, including both China and the regions of the former Soviet Union, has changed dramatically, with most transitioning to some kind of market-based economy.

Prior to its collapse however, communist states established distinct societies in which a substantial portion of the world’s population lived. Communism offered an alternative and a challenge to the prevailing capitalist economic system. The Cold War in the second half of the century pitted a communist world led by the Soviet Union and China against the United States and its allies. Communism was an important and distinctive social, economic and political force across the globe.

**SLIDE 21.3 [Image: Soviet Agriculture]**

Was communism too brief a phenomenon to warrant such sustained attention, especially as it recedes into the past? Does its legacy deserve detailed consideration, compared to other developments during the last century like fascism, or fundamentalism?

These issues engage with a broader question for historians writing about the last century in world history, that is “What should be covered and in what detail?”

It’s only with the benefit of hindsight that communism can be viewed as a brief or impermanent development. Many people living through the upheavals of the twentieth century certainly viewed communism as a central feature of their world. But topics like population growth, industrial development, or global warming may well seem more important to future generations than the brief communist experience which failed.

**SLIDE 21.4 [Image: Women, Nature and Industrialization]**

One might consider an alternate way to integrate the coverage of Communism in the last part of the book. Its approach to industrialization and modernity was just one of many and could be examined alongside capitalist, socialist, fascist and fundamentalist alternatives. Major social developments impacted both communist and non-communist societies alike. Feminism and secularism in the communist world, for instance, were part of broader twentieth century patterns. Moreover, communist regimes were not alone in attempting to secure totalitarian control of societies or committing atrocities and mass killings.

**SLIDE 21.5** **[Images: The Cult of Mao and Lenin]**

But if we integrate the communist experience into a broader context, the historical trajectory of communism becomes less evident. For me, communism remains one of the most important topics of the last century, worthy of its own chapter.

While communism collapsed in most regions by the opening of the twenty-first century, it still has had a major influence on the multi-polar post-Cold-War world that we live in today. The growing influence of China in the world economy and a nuclear armed North Korea are just two twenty-first century legacies of communism.

However, historical narratives evolve through time. Depending on future developments and the concerns of the next generation, communism may no longer warrant its own chapter. The past, it turns out, depends on the future.