The Communist Parties

One of the defining characteristics of a communist state, it was suggested in chapter 1, is the existence of a communist or Marxist–Leninist party exercising dominant political authority within the society in question. Not all the parties we shall consider in this chapter in fact call themselves communist. The Polish party, for instance, is called the Polish United Workers’ Party, and the Albanian party is called the Party of Labour of Albania (see Table 4.1). Nor are these parties necessarily the only parties that are permitted to exist in their respective societies; almost half of them, in fact, permit more than one party to exist, with seats in the legislature and a formally independent status (see Table 3.1). In none of these states, however, is any genuinely competitive political party permitted to exist, and the non-communist parties in these countries are generally of a more or less ‘puppet’ character, contesting elections together with the communist party on the basis of a common list of candidates and with a common manifesto. The dominant role of the communist party within the political system, and within the party of its central leadership, is indeed the essential characteristic of a communist state not just to political scientists but also so far as the communist party authorities themselves are concerned; it was to resist any challenge to that role that the Soviet Union and its allies intervened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and appeared likely to do so again in Poland in 1980–81.

The ‘leading role of the party’, as this dominant role of the party in the society is known, derives from a number of circumstances, including the existence in a number of these countries of a tradition of autocratic rule and the establishment of a centralised system of economic management. It
derives also from a number of ideological sources, in particular from the doctrine of the 'vanguard party', formulated most fully by Lenin in works such as *What is to be Done?* (1902). In *What is to be Done?*, Lenin argued that socialism would not necessarily come about through the automatic extension of trade union and other forms of economic activity by the working class. Strikes, Lenin argued, represented the class struggle in embryo, but 'only in embryo', because the workers did not as yet have an awareness of the irreconcilable nature of the conflict between their interests and those of the capitalist class. This, Lenin went on, could 'only be brought to them from the outside', by the 'educated representatives of the propertied classes — the intelligentsia'. 'There can be no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory,' Lenin insisted, and the role of the vanguard could be fulfilled only by a party which was guided by this advanced theory. The struggle for socialism, in Lenin's view, must therefore place at least as much emphasis upon raising workers' political consciousness as upon bread-and-butter economic issues, and within this struggle a role of particular importance devolved upon the intellectuals who possessed a knowledge of and commitment to the revolutionary theory by which the wider movement must be guided.

No less important was the question of party structure and organisation, and it was upon this issue that Lenin and the Bolsheviks (majority group) split from the remaining Russian Social Democrats, thereafter called the Mensheviks (minority group), at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903. Lenin argued in *What is to be Done?* that the first and most urgent practical task was to 'create an organisation of revolutionaries able to guarantee the energy, stability and continuity of the political struggle'. Such an organisation, Lenin insisted, must embrace 'primarily and chiefly people whose profession consists of revolutionary activity'; and it must 'inevitably be not very wide and as secret as possible', since it was essential to avoid police penetration. Lenin added that the professional revolutionaries must 'serve' the mass movement, not dominate it or 'think for everyone'; he held that professional revolutionaries would be thrown up by the mass movement itself in 'ever-increasing numbers'.