

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Brutal Legacy of 100 Years of Communism

On 7 November 1917 (25 October 1917 by the old Russian calendar) a group of ideological communists (called Bolsheviks) led an uprising that led to the Bolsheviks seizing power and establishing the first major communist government in history. During the years of the Soviet Union, this date was lavishly celebrated as The Great October Socialist Revolution. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of that totalitarian dictatorship, Russians have been confused about how to recognize this important date in their history. This year, 2017, one would expect there to be significant celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. But 7 November 2017 was merely recognized as “the revolution of 1917 in Russia.” No major celebrations or national events were scheduled. Strangely, there was an official silence about this momentous date in Russia’s history. Vladimir Putin does not see himself in line with the Bolsheviks; rather he sees himself as a czar, the successor to the Romanovs who ruled Russia for centuries—the days of Russia’s greatness as a unified nation. He does not like dissent and he certainly does not wish to celebrate a revolution against the old, glorious days of the czars. His goal is to restore the Russian hegemony of the czarist state closely tied to the Russian Orthodox church, which he has faithfully supported. His Russia is not the Russia of Lenin but the Russia of Czar Nicholas.

However, despite Putin’s decision to basically ignore the October Revolution, history cannot. It was the most brutal experiment in history. The Communists promised to obliterate capitalism and institute a better world—of a classless society where the state would “wither away.” But a century of communism in power (i.e., Russia, China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba and many of the Central European nations) has resulted in 100 million people being killed through a state-sponsored brutality that cannot be overlooked. Using the combined work of historians David Satter and Stephen Kotkin, I want to summarize the true legacy of this 20th century experiment in communist idealism:

- As Satter argues, the real goal of the Bolsheviks “was spiritual: to translate Marxist-Leninist ideology into reality. For the first time, a state was created that was based explicitly on atheism and claimed infallibility. This was totally incompatible with Western civilization, which presumes the existence of a higher power over and above society and the state . . . In countries where communism came to hold sway, it hollowed out society’s moral core, degrading the individual and turning him into a cog in the machinery of the state. Communists committed murder on such a scale as to all but eliminate the value of life and to destroy the individual conscience in survivors.”

- Such a system therefore set in motion decades of murder on an industrial scale. No fewer than 20 million Soviet citizens were put to death by the regime or died “as a direct result of its repressive policies. This does not include the millions who died in the wars, epidemics and famines that were predictable consequences of Bolshevik policies, if not directly caused by them.” Satter itemizes the details:
 1. 200,000 killed during the Red Terror (1918-1922).
 2. 11 million dead due to famine and dekulakization.
 3. 700,000 executed during the Great Terror (1937-1938).
 4. 400,000 more executed between 1929 and 1953.
 5. 1.6 million dead due to forced population transfers.
 6. A minimum of 2.7 million dead in the Gulag, labor colonies and special settlements. [This does not include the Red Army penal battalions during World War II, partisans and civilians killed in postwar revolts against Soviet rule in Ukraine and the Baltics or other Gulag inmates freed, who died almost immediately.]
 7. If we add to this list the deaths caused by communist regimes that the Soviet Union created and supported (e.g., Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia) the total number of victims is about 100 million! Communism is thus the greatest human catastrophe in history.

- Communist tools of destruction have included mass deportations, forced labor camps and police-state terror—a model established by Lenin (the founder of Bolshevism in Russia) and his successor Joseph Stalin, and continued by Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot of Cambodia and the Kim dynasty of North Korea. Mao’s plan, for example, to collectivize agriculture in China was a veritable disaster resulting in between 16 and 32 million deaths in one of history’s deadliest famines. The Cambodian regime under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in 1975 drove millions into the countryside to work on collectives and forced labor projects. Their goal was a classless, solely agrarian society. As many as two million Cambodians perished, a quarter of the population of that nation.

- As Stephen Kotkin argues, from Russia and China to Cambodia, North Korea and Cuba, communist dictators have shared key traits: “All have conformed, more or less, to the Leninist type: a fusion of militant ideologue and unprincipled intriguer. And all have possessed an extreme willpower—the prerequisite for attaining what only unspeakable bloodshed could bring”—mass slaughter.

- Kotkin: “But if we’ve learned one lesson from the communist century, it is this: That to implement Marxist ideals is to betray them. Marx’s demand to ‘abolish private property’ was a clarion call to action—and an inexorable path to the creation of an oppressive, unchecked state . . . But anticapitalism also served as a program for an alternative world order, one in which long-suppressed nationalist aims might be realized. For Stalin and Mao, heirs to proud ancient civilizations, Europe and the US represented the allure and threat of a superior West. The communists set themselves the task of matching and overtaking their

capitalist rivals and winning a central place for their own countries on the international stage. Vladimir Putin's resistance to the West, with his peculiar mix of Soviet nostalgia and Russian Orthodox revival, builds on Stalin's precedent."

Thankfully the Soviet Union and the international communist system that once ruled a third of the world's territory has joined the dustbin of history. What have we learned from this ghastly experiment in an intolerant ideology, rooted in atheism and thereby completely devoid of the value of human life? Allow me to suggest several observations:

1. Any civilization must be rooted in universal ethical principles that are sourced in God. The will to power is not sufficient, for it merely leads to a totalitarian state. Every communist regime of the 20th century has demonstrated this proposition.
2. Any meaningful, functioning government must have the capacity to check the growth of dictatorial power. Otherwise, the founder/leader becomes a cult-like figure that demands near worship and devotion. What did the Soviet Union do when Lenin died? Preserved his body in the Kremlin wall for all to see. China did the same with Mao, as did North Korea with its founder Kim il-Sung. Unchecked leaders with totalitarian power become "substitute Christs" who use power not for righteous ends; instead, they end up destroying everything dear to a stable civilization.
3. Politics and government are more than simply the personal acquisition and use of power. The power the state has is to not only promote order, but also justice, fairness, equity and peace (see Romans 13:1-7, the book of Amos and Daniel 4). Governing is a stewardship responsibility before God and it matters to Him how rulers govern—an important principle for Americans in 2017 to remember.

See David Satter in the *Wall Street Journal* (7 November 2017); Serge Schmiemann in the *New York Times* (8 November 2017); and Stephen Kotkin in the *Wall Street Journal* (4-5 November 2017).