



Celebrating 200 Years of Communism

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Two centuries ago Karl Marx was born. He wasn't a very nice person, as Paul Johnson detailed in his book *The Intellectuals*. Nor was Marx much of an intellectual. Worse, the consequences of Marx's ideas were disastrous.

That his philosophy was of little practical value was unsurprising. As Johnson pointed out, Marx's ideas were developed separate from facts. Like so many other academics, the communist theorist believed that reality should never get in the way of a good theory.

A similar reality-free approach was taken by those who followed him and tried to put his ideas into effect. Applying the Marxist template to countries as divergent as Russia, China, Romania, North Korea, Albania, Cambodia, Czechoslovakia, and Ethiopia was bound to end badly. But who would have imagined how badly?

For those who forgot, or never learned, communism's toll, both *Death by Government* by R.J. Rummel and *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, with several authors, are essential reading. The numbers are grotesque, horrifying, unbelievable. The Black Book figures 85 to 100 million victims.

The madness became almost total under Pol Pot in Kampuchea, the name affixed to the national charnel house previously known as Cambodia. Yet at least there was a purpose, though mad, in that tragic land. The old could not be reeducated. It had to be eradicated.

More chilling was killing that seemed random, bureaucratic, perfunctory, petty. Even the killers did not pretend there was a higher purpose.

Observed Rummel of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, admired by so many: "Where to find the 'enemies of the people' they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering 'plots.' They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their loved ones."

Of course, not every communist ruler intended to commit mass murder. And there were plenty of ambitious activists, indolent time-servers, and indifferent folks in between who adopted the reigning zeitgeist, did what they were told, and concentrated on personal survival.

Still, what is perhaps surprising is how every experience with Marx the political lodestar ended badly. The lack of mass repression and murder was surprising.

The good news of 1989 was that a real human being ran the Soviet Communist Party while those in charge throughout Eastern Europe were realists—they knew their systems had failed and could not be sustained without the aid of the Red Army. Little of political communism lives on.

China is essentially a fascist state, with a form of state capitalism. Vietnam seems to be a bit of the same, without the growing totalitarianism. North Korea is a traditional Asian monarchy.

Still, not everyone gave up the faith even when the Soviets and Eastern Europeans tore down the real walls—backed by guns, mines, dogs—which held them in. Twenty and twenty-eight years ago the New York Times wrote entertaining stories about delightful old revolutionaries who populated the Sunset Hall retirement home in Los Angeles.

A 101-year-old resident, who had been a messenger for the Bolsheviks, proclaimed that Lenin was “the greatest politician we ever had in this world.” Another resident, only 90, announced that “socialism, crushed to the earth, will rise again.”

The Times evidently found the retirees to be quite charming. (It is difficult to imagine a similar account of, say, the Horst Wessel Hall, home to aging Nazis.) With only 11 residents and \$300,000 in debt, Sunset closed in 2005.

Perhaps most disturbing is when those entrusted with the future of liberal democratic states don't understand what is at stake. After protracted debate Trier, Germany—Marx's birthplace—erected a statue of Marx from China.

There are so many levels of bizarre to the gift. It came from a government which is moving back toward dictatorship and totalitarianism.

Then there is the small matter of Marx's legacy for China. *The Black Book of Communism* estimates more—six to ten million directly, 20 million in prison, and 20 to 43 million in the misnamed Great Leap Forward. The Black Book's warning from 1999 looks increasingly prescient: “because the regime has never really disavowed its founder, it is still prepared to return to some of his original methods in difficult moments.”

Finally, there is Trier's acceptance of the poisoned gift. Say what you will about the average Confederate general, he wasn't responsible for nearly as many deaths as Marx. Perhaps next will be a statue of Hermann Goering, head of Nazi Germany's air force. He was a decorated war hero from World War I, after all, and is part of his nation's history.

Perhaps helping to explain the challenges facing the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker, one of the EU's three presidents (he runs the European Commission), gave an impassioned defense

of Marx. The poor, misunderstood man simply “was a philosopher, who thought into the future [and] had creative aspirations.” Marx just wanted to improve social rights.

Well, yes, Marx cannot be directly blamed for scores of millions of deaths. However, the philosophy which he promulgated led to that result in country after country.

Indeed, China’s President Xi Jinping made the connection, lauding Marx as “the main founder of Marxism, the founder of Marxist political parties and the creator of international communism.” The genesis of that creation, international communism, is a strange historical event to celebrate.

Two hundred years ago Marx was born. He belongs in a small but important category: people who should never have existed. Unfortunately, we can’t retroactively erase him from history. But we shouldn’t treat his life like something to celebrate.

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