

Do Socialism and Communism Create Opportunistic Tyrants Like Stalin?

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The admiration of your fellow college students for communist leaders is slightly down from last year, according to the annual report on U.S. attitudes toward socialism, which was released by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. Joseph Stalin saw the greatest fall in popularity, from 12 percent of millennials reporting a favorable impression of him down to 6 percent. However, a horrifying 23 percent of Americans between ages 21 and 29 believe that Stalin was a “hero.” Also, 32 percent of millennials hold a favorable view of Karl Marx, slightly down from 34 percent last year.

This drop in popularity is comforting, but only slightly. Chances are you have friends who still idealize socialism, communism, and the men who enforced these ideologies with an iron hand. But what they probably don’t realize is the awful truth about these utopian visions of a better world. Let’s quickly walk through some of the history they ought to consider.

Sitting in the reading room of the British Museum, Marx theorized that society was a struggle between wage laborers and the owners of the means of production, and that the latter were “class enemies.” He feared that factory owners were exploiting factory workers, farm owners were exploiting day laborers, and so on. Many university students today share his fear of exploitation, rail against “the one percent” and the “privileged,” and desire a class-free society.

“I wonder what Karl Marx would have made of [the factory workers I met],” said Leslie T. Chang in her TED talk, *The Voices of China’s Workers*. She continued: “His view of the world persists, [as does] our tendency to see the workers as faceless masses, to imagine that we can know what they’re really thinking. ... Certainly, the factory conditions are really tough, and it’s nothing you or I would want to do, but from their perspective, where they’re coming from is much worse.”

Chang notes that since China’s economic liberalization, factory work has allowed hundreds of millions of Chinese workers to escape rural poverty to become middle class, and that most factory workers go on to start their own small businesses. They work in factories willingly because the alternative is grinding rural poverty.

Marx and his followers, sadly, did not realize that capitalism-driven industrialization ultimately creates widespread prosperity, and they ended up hurting the very workers they aimed to help.

Thanks in part to the factories that Marx detested, the United Kingdom's average income was three times higher when he died than when he was born.

After communists seized power in Russia a century ago, in the name of equality, anyone who was too well-off had to be identified and punished. Those with specialized knowledge, such as engineers, or those who had "non-labor income" were suspect.

In the Russian countryside, any farmer who produced enough food to sell as surplus, as opposed to any farmer who produced only enough for his family, was labeled a "kulak"—a class enemy, engaged in the alleged crime of enrichment through trade. Any farmer who hired help, who owned a creamery or other machine, or who rented out agricultural equipment, was also labeled a "kulak." The kulaks' poorer neighbors were encouraged to take away their homes and steel their possessions.

Comforting his wife, who was troubled that her acquaintance Marusia's family had been imprisoned as kulaks, a devout communist said the following:

"You see, they can't make a revolution with white gloves. Annihilating the kulaks is a bloody and difficult process, but it has to be done. Marusia's tragedy isn't as simple as it seems to you. What was her husband sent to the camps for? It is hard to believe that he wasn't guilty of anything at all. You don't end up in the camps for nothing."

The man quoted above was eventually arrested and shot. No specific charges were ever given. His wife was sent to the labor camps shortly thereafter.

That anecdote is representative of the madness of that era. Millions of "class enemies," political dissenters, and other unfortunate victims were sent to work in the Gulag, the forced-labor-camp system created under Lenin and greatly expanded under Stalin. Anyone who tried to escape was summarily executed. Those close to Stalin were not exempt, and more than a third of leading camp executioners ended up as prisoners in the camps themselves.

In some camps, prisoners mined radioactive material without adequate protection and died of radiation poisoning. In others, frostbitten prisoners chopped timber and dragged the logs back to camp barefoot in the winter. In others still, prisoners labored to produce food on collective farms while they themselves were allowed only meager rations. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "It is estimated that the combination of very long working hours, harsh climatic and other working conditions, inadequate food, and summary executions killed off at least 10 percent of the Gulag's total prisoner population each year."

The slave labor of the camps helped sustain the ruling class of the allegedly classless Soviet regime as the economy collapsed. Agricultural productivity plummeted following the removal of the kulaks and the collectivization of the farms. As millions starved to death, some resorting to cannibalism to survive, Stalin forbade use of the words *famine*, *hunger*, or *starvation*. Even doctors dared not diagnose a starving patient's condition accurately. Stalin blamed the clear failures of his centrally planned system on deliberate sabotage and undermining of the economy

by disloyal elements. He claimed that hidden enemies were everywhere and used that as an excuse to send more and more people to death and to the labor camps.

In sum, to bring about equality, the communist system imprisoned or killed those who had attained expertise and achieved success—whether in farming or in a technical occupation such as engineering. They initially redistributed wealth, but many of the peasants who at first benefited from robbing the kulaks ended up starving to death. By imprisoning or murdering many of the most productive people, while simultaneously eliminating market incentives for productivity by collectivizing industries and banning competition, communists brought about far deeper and more widespread poverty than under capitalism. (Capitalism, in fact, has helped bring world poverty to an all-time low.)

Research suggests that the number of unnatural deaths wrought by communism may be upward of eighty million—a number so high that the violence of Tsarist Russia, the Spanish Inquisition, and “Bloody” Mary’s English counterreformation pale in comparison. Today, seven out of ten Americans underestimate the number of lives that communism extinguished. Perhaps that explains part of communism’s continued appeal. But if your friends could travel back in time to the Stalin era, they would see that literal class warfare benefits no one except opportunistic tyrants like Stalin.

And they would see that he was no hero.

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