



Life Under Communism Was No Liberation For Women

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Over the last few months, *The New York Times* has published a number of warm and nostalgic recollections of communism. Authors have opined about the supposed optimism, idealism and moral authority of communism. Perhaps the most bizarre article so far claimed that women behind the Iron Curtain enjoyed greater sexual satisfaction and more independence than their Western counterparts (except, of course, when it came to freedom of thought, speech, religion, association or movement).

I would have chosen to commemorate 100 years since the Bolshevik Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union in a different way. Over one hundred million people have died or were killed while building socialism during the course of the 20th century. Call me crazy, but that staggering number of victims of communism seems to me more important than the somewhat dubious claim that Bulgarian comrades enjoyed more orgasms than women in the West. But, as one Russian babushka said to another, *suum cuique pulchrum est*.

I am, however, intrigued by the striking similarities between the *Times* articles. To the greatest extent possible, they seem to avoid the broader perspective on life under communism (i.e., widespread oppression and economic failure). Instead, they focus on the experiences of individual people, some of whom never lived in communist countries in the first place.

In *When Communism Inspired Americans*, the author remembers her socialist parents and the life of the communist sympathizers in 1950s America. In *Thanks to Mom, the Marxist Revolutionary*, the author remembers his batty mother, who dragged him from one communist hell-hole to another in search of a "real world" experience. In *'Make It So': 'Star Trek' and Its Debt to Revolutionary Socialism*, the author quotes Captain Picard, who explains to a cryogenically unfrozen businessman from the 20th century, "People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We've grown out of our infancy."

Speaking of hunger and infancy, here are some completely gratuitous eye witness accounts of parents eating their own children during the man-made famine in Ukraine in the 1930s. Communism may have influenced science fiction writers, but real life in the USSR was no picnic.

"Where did all bread disappear, I do not really know, maybe they have taken it all abroad. The authorities have confiscated it, removed from the villages, loaded grain into the railway coaches and took it away someplace. They have searched the houses, taken away everything to the smallest thing. All the vegetable gardens, all the cellars were raked out and everything was taken away. Wealthy peasants were exiled into Siberia even before Holodomor during the 'collectivization.' Communists came, collected everything... People were laying everywhere as dead flies. The stench was awful. Many of our neighbors and acquaintances from our street died... Some were eating their own children. I would have never been able to eat my child. One of our neighbors came home when her husband, suffering from severe starvation ate their own baby-daughter. This woman went crazy."

One has to wait until *Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism*, to meet an actual Eastern European. "Consider Ana Durcheva from Bulgaria," the author writes, "who was 65 when I first met her in 2011. Having lived her first 43 years under Communism, she often complained that the new free market hindered Bulgarians' ability to develop healthy amorous relationships. 'Sure, some things were bad during that time, but my life was full of romance.'" Durcheva's daughter, in contrast, works too much, "and when she comes home at night she is too tired to be with her husband."

What are we to make of this? Are we merely to deduce that the life of a young and, apparently, attractive woman behind the Iron Curtain was not completely devoid of pleasure? No. The article is explicit in stating that "communist women enjoyed a degree of self-sufficiency that few Western women could have imagined." This is unadulterated rubbish. I grew up under communism and here is what I recall.

First, all communist countries were run by men and female leaders, like Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir, would have been unthinkable. Women who rose to prominence, like Raisa Gorbachev and Elena Ceausescu, did so purely as appendages of their powerful husbands.

Second, the author concedes that "gender wage disparities and labor segregation persisted, and... the communists never fully reformed domestic patriarchy." I would say so. In a typical Eastern European family, the woman, in addition to having a day job at a factory, was expected to clean the apartment, shop for food, cook dinner and raise the children. The Western sexual revolution passed the communist bloc by and ex-communist countries remain much more patriarchal than their Western counterparts to this day.

Third, communist societies were socially uber-conservative. As such, pornography and prostitution were strictly prohibited, divorces were discouraged and divorced people ostracized, and prophylactics and the pill were hard to obtain. (Think about it for one hot second. Why would economies unable to produce enough bread and toilet paper, generate plentiful and regular supply of condoms? This makes no sense!) The reason why we refer to communist countries as "totalitarian" is because the state wanted to control every aspect of human existence. Sexual autonomy was, well, autonomous. Being outside the control of the all-powerful state, it was treated with suspicion and suppressed.

But don't take my word for it. You can still visit a few communist countries, including Cuba and North Korea, and compare the social status and empowerment of their women with those in the West. Had the esteemed editors of the *Times* done so, they would have, I hope, thought twice about publishing a series of pro-communist excreta.

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