

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## Marian L. Tupy on 100 years of communism: Death and deprivation

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On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. It did so by accident.

During a press conference, the spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party noted that citizens of the German Democratic Republic would be allowed to travel to the West. For months, pressure was building on the authorities, as tens of thousands of East Germans tried to flee to West Germany via the unguarded Hungarian frontier.

To regain control of the situation, the authorities agreed to start providing exit visas to the restless populace in the near future, but both the nature and the timing of the concession got lost in a frenzy of questions that followed the announcement.

The word of the border opening spread like wildfire. By midnight thousands of Berliners squared off against a few dozen confused policemen guarding the Bornholmer Street checkpoint. Overwhelmed, the police let the people through. Over the next three days, three million East Germans got their first taste of the life in the West.

The communist authority in East Germany crumbled along with the Wall. Within a year, the two Germanys were reunified. In Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, communist governments met the same fate. Finally, in August 1991, communism fell in the Soviet Union, and the country dissolved on December 26.

**Twenty-eight years later**, those of us who lived through those momentous days still cherish the freedoms that we gained. For most people, alas, communism is but an echo of a distant past. So much so that socialism, an economic system of communist countries, is experiencing something of a renaissance.

In Venezuela, for example, an 18-year-old experiment with socialism is entering a horrific denouement marked by hyperinflation, hunger, rising infant mortality rates and increasingly brutal suppression of the opposition. In the United Kingdom, an unrepentant socialist came within a few percentage points of winning this year's election, while in the United States, a socialist senator almost became the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency.

Let us, therefore, remind ourselves what communism wrought.

Writing in this newspaper, A. Barton Hinkle noted that "while the Soviet Union is no more and communism has been discredited in most eyes for many years, it is hard even now to grasp the sheer scale of agony imposed by the brutal ideology of collectivism." Indeed.

“The Black Book of Communism,” a postmortem of communist atrocities compiled by European and American academics in 1997, concluded that the human cost of genocides, extrajudicial executions, deportations, and artificial famines stood at over 94 million.

Professor Mark Kramer from the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University edited “The Black Book.” Subsequent research, he told me, suggests that “the total number (of people) who died unnatural deaths under communist regimes ... (is) upward of 80 million.”

Let’s put that new number in perspective.

Between 1825 and 1917, wrote Stéphane Courtois from the French National Centre for Scientific Research, the Tsarist regime in Russia “carried out 6,321 political executions ... whereas in two months of official ‘Red Terror’ in the fall of 1918 Bolshevism achieved some 15,000.”

Or, consider the Inquisition. According to Professor Agostino Borromeo, a historian of Catholicism at the Sapienza University in Rome, “there were some 125,000 trials of suspected heretics in Spain ... (between 1478 and 1834, but only) about 1 percent of the defendants (i.e., 1,250) were executed.”

Finally, consider the counterreformation. Queen “Bloody” Mary, who tried to restore Catholicism to England between 1553 and 1558, sent 280 dissenters to the stake. Between November 1917, when the communists came to power in Russia, and the North Korean famine in the mid-1990s, communists were responsible for deaths of at least 154 people every hour.

**Consider, also, the economic** legacy of communism. While socialist economies of Central and Eastern Europe continued to grow for much of the communist period, capitalist countries in Western Europe grew faster.

For example, look at East and West Germany. At the end of World War II, average incomes in Germany were, by definition, equal. By 1989, West German incomes were almost twice as high as those in East Germany.

Then there is North and South Korea. Once again, incomes in Korea were equal, on average, at the conclusion of World War II. Contemporary data for North Korea is tough to come by, but Professor Angus Maddison of Groningen University estimated that in 2008, South Koreans were 18 times richer than North Koreans.

Finally, those who are truly interested in the reality of daily life under socialism can see it for themselves by visiting Cuba and Venezuela.

No matter where it was tried, communism has always resulted in mountains of dead bodies. As for socialist economics, it has always resulted in shortages, inefficiency, poverty, and desperation. The verdict of history is clear, but only if people are willing to see it.

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