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Che Guevara and the West

By **Marian L. Tupy**

Twenty years ago, communism collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe. Today, it survives in North Korea and Cuba - countries where one can still see empty shops, long queues, dilapidated infrastructure, and the omnipresent fear of secret police, random imprisonment and unjust execution. Yet Che Guevara, the man who played a vital role in setting up the machinery of political repression and economic stagnation in Cuba, has become an icon in the West. Indeed, communism and some of its protagonists continue to enjoy an unexpected degree of popularity throughout the world. The 100 million victims of communism deserve better.

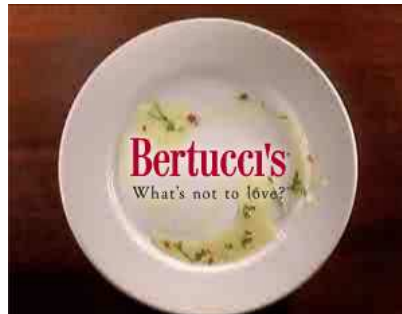
Che Guevara, the Argentinean communist who fermented revolutions in Cuba and the Congo, was finally dispatched by the Bolivian forces in 1967. Some 42 years later - long after the specter of revolutionary communism ceased to hound most of mankind - Che appears to be having the last laugh. His image is ubiquitous in the West - adorning the shirts and bags of an affluent but historically illiterate generation. Prince Harry, third in line to the British throne, was spotted wearing a Che t-shirt few years ago. This year's "Icons" collection by Belstaff (an Italian clothing company) contains a "Che Guevara replica jacket."


Che Guevara, as Alvaro Vargas Llosa shows in *The Che Guevara Myth and the Future of Liberty*, was a megalomaniac and a murderer. Embarrassingly for the young idealists sporting his image, he was also a racist, a homophobe and an anti-Semite. "The Negro is indolent and lazy," Che opined about his Congolese comrades, "and spends his money on frivolities, whereas the European is forward-looking, organized and intelligent." Ignorance about the real Che is universal. Thus, Angola's capital of Luanda boasts a Che Guevara Street and the South African capital of Pretoria may soon be graced by a street of the same name.

The continued - albeit limited - attractiveness of communist ideals and some of its protagonists, such as Karl Marx (anti-Semite), Vladimir Lenin (founding father of the Gulag), Fidel Castro (visit Cuba and see for yourself), and Che Guevara, suggests that mankind is yet to come to terms with the legacy of communism. Nazi victims are rightfully remembered in countless books and films. Their relatives can visit well-funded museums in Berlin and Washington, D.C. Except for a few discredited characters, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran among them, people around the world know about the nature and extent of the Holocaust. The crimes of communism, in contrast, remain, by and large, shrouded in veils of ignorance and denial.

Communism has so far escaped an appropriate degree of moral opprobrium for several reasons. As the historian Paul Hollander argues, most victims of communism died due to appalling living conditions in the Gulag and laogai (the Soviet and Chinese forced labor camps respectively). They were not killed in a determined way - as symbolized by the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Moreover, the evidence of communist crimes is often difficult to collect. The Russian archives, for example, have been shut by a government determined to whitewash Russia's communist past including its most notorious protagonist - Joseph Stalin.

The complicity of the current governing and intellectual elites in most of Central and Eastern Europe in the perpetuation of communism is another reason. Some, like the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, were Soviet spies. Others, like the Slovak Prime



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Minister Robert Fico, were ordinary communist party members. While the degree of their complicity with communism varies, these men (and women) have been morally compromised. Absolute condemnation of communism, in other words, would amount to condemnation of their past behavior.

Few people have the courage publicly to admit their mistakes. Most prefer to justify their actions or to forget them. Unfortunately, many of the Western intellectuals who promoted communist ideas and minimized communist crimes have never recanted. Driven by naïve idealism and loathing of Western imperfections, they embraced a utopian vision of a society free of inequities between classes, races and genders; a society free of profit, greed and war. The more Western democracies tried to overcome their shortcomings, the more did the Western idealists trust the empty rhetoric of communism.

In the end, the only equality that communism achieved was that of a breadline and that of a mass grave. Che Guevara symbolizes communism like no other. His image, like his beliefs, belongs in the dustbin of history.

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