

The Washington Post

Murderous idealism

By Paul Hollander
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The Berlin Wall that came down 20 years ago this month was an apt symbol of communism. It represented a historically unprecedented effort to prevent people from "voting with their feet" and leaving a society they rejected. The wall was only the most visible segment of a vast system of obstacles and fortifications: the Iron Curtain, which stretched for thousands of miles along the border of the "Socialist Commonwealth." I am one of those who managed to cross these obstacles in November 1956, when they were partially and temporarily dismantled along the Austrian-Hungarian border. My experiences in communist Hungary, where I lived until age 24, had a durable impact on my life and work.

While greatly concerned with communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Americans -- hostile or sympathetic -- actually knew little about communism, and little is said here today about the unraveling of the Soviet empire. The media's fleeting attention to the momentous events of the late 1980s and early 1990s matched their earlier indifference to communist systems. There is little public awareness of the large-scale atrocities, killings and human rights violations that occurred in communist states, especially compared with awareness of the Holocaust and Nazism (which led to far fewer deaths). The number of

documentaries, feature films or television programs about communist societies is minuscule compared with those on Nazi Germany and/or the Holocaust, and few universities offer courses on the remaining or former communist states. For most Americans, communism and its various incarnations remained an abstraction.

The different moral responses to Nazism and communism in the West can be interpreted as a result of the perception of communist atrocities as byproducts of noble intentions that were hard to realize without resorting to harsh measures. The Nazi outrages, by contrast, are perceived as unmitigated evil lacking in any lofty justification and unsupported by an attractive ideology. There is far more physical evidence and information about the Nazi mass murders, and Nazi methods of extermination were highly premeditated and

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repugnant, whereas many victims of communist systems died because of lethal living conditions in their places of detention. Most of the victims of communism were not killed by advanced industrial techniques.

Communist systems ranged from tiny Albania to gigantic China; from highly industrialized Eastern European countries to underdeveloped African ones. While divergent in many respects, they had in common a reliance on Marxism-Leninism as their source of legitimacy, the one-party system, control over the economy and media, and the presence of a huge political police force. They also shared an ostensible commitment to creating a morally superior human being -- the socialist or communist man.

Political violence under communism had an idealistic origin and a cleansing, purifying objective. Those persecuted and killed were defined as politically and morally corrupt and a danger to a superior social system. The Marxist doctrine of class struggle provided ideological support for mass murder. People were persecuted not for what they did but for belonging to social categories that made them suspect.

In the aftermath of the fall of Soviet communism, many Western intellectuals remain convinced that capitalism is the root of all evil. There has been a long tradition of such animosity among Western intellectuals

who gave the benefit of doubt or outright sympathy to political systems that denounced the profit motive and proclaimed their commitment to create a more humane and egalitarian society, and unselfish human beings. The failure of communist systems to improve human nature doesn't mean that all such attempts are doomed, but improvements will be modest and are unlikely to be attained by coercion.

Soviet communism collapsed for many reasons, including the economic inefficiency that resulted in chronic shortages of food and consumer goods, and pervasive and mendacious propaganda, which amounted to the routine misrepresentation of reality highlighting the gap between theory and practice, and promise and fulfillment. The political will of leaders behind the Iron Curtain diminished over time -- in part because of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 revelations about Joseph Stalin's crimes but also because of their own experiences of the

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system's flaws. They no longer had the will to crush dissent. In the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev allowed new revelations of the errors and evils of communism to be aired -- further undermining the legitimacy of communist rule.

The failure of Soviet communism confirms that humans motivated by lofty ideals are capable of inflicting great suffering with a clear conscience. But communism's collapse also suggests that under certain conditions people can tell the difference between right and wrong. The embrace and rejection of communism correspond to the spectrum of attitudes ranging from deluded and destructive idealism to the realization that human nature precludes utopian social arrangements and that the careful balancing of ends and means is the essential precondition of creating and preserving a decent society.

Paul Hollander is a professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and an associate of Harvard's Davis Center of Russian and Eurasian Studies. His paper "Reflections on Communism 20 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall" is being published by the Cato Institute today.

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