

Hail the Reds

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Over the seven decades of its existence, and despite having to spend so much time preparing, fighting, and recovering from wars, the Soviet Union managed to create one of the great achievements of human history: a great industrial society that eliminated most of the inequalities of wealth, income, education and opportunity that plagued what preceded it, what came after it, and what competed with it; a society in which health care and education through university were free (and university students received living stipends); where rent, utilities and public transportation were subsidized, along with books, periodicals and cultural events; where inflation was eliminated, pensions were generous, and child care was subsidized.

By 1933, with the capitalist world deeply mired in a devastating economic crisis, unemployment was declared abolished, and remained so for the next five and a half decades, until socialism, itself, was abolished. The Communists produced social security more robust than provided even by Scandinavian-style social democracy, but achieved with fewer resources and a lower level of development and in spite of the unflagging efforts of the capitalist world to see to it that socialism failed. Soviet socialism was, and remains, a model for humanity — of what can be achieved outside the confines and contradictions of capitalism. But by the end of the '80s, counterrevolution was sweeping Eastern Europe and Mikhail Gorbachev was dismantling the pillars of Soviet socialism. Naively, blindly, stupidly, some expected Gorbachev's demolition project to lead the way to a prosperous consumer society, in which Soviet citizens, their bank accounts bulging with incomes earned from new jobs landed in a robust market economy, would file into colorful, luxurious shopping malls, to pick clean store shelves bursting with consumer goods. Others imagined a new era of a flowering multiparty democracy and expanded civil liberties, coexisting with public ownership of the commanding heights of the economy, a model that seemed to owe more to utopian blueprints than hardheaded reality.

Of course, none of the great promises of the counterrevolution were kept. While at the time the demise of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was proclaimed, not least by leftist intellectuals in the US, as a great victory for humanity, more than a decade later there's little to celebrate. The dismantling of socialism has, in a word, been a catastrophe, a great swindle that has not only delivered none of what it promised, but has wreaked irreparable harm, not only in the former socialist countries, but throughout the Western world, as well. Countless millions have been plunged deep into poverty, imperialism has been given a free hand, and wages and benefits in the West have bowed under the pressure of intensified competition for jobs and industry unleashed by a flood of jobless from the former socialist countries, where joblessness once, rightly, was considered an obscenity. Numberless voices in Russia, Romania, East Germany and elsewhere lament what has been stolen from them-and from humanity as a whole: "We lived better under communism. We had jobs. We had security." And with the threat of jobs migrating to low-wage, high unemployment countries of Eastern Europe, workers in Western Europe have been forced to accept a longer working day, lower pay, and degraded benefits. Today, they fight a desperate rearguard action, where the victories are few, the defeats many. They too lived better — once.

But that's only part of the story. For others, for investors and corporations, who've found new markets and opportunities for profitable investment, and can reap the benefits of the lower labor costs that attend intensified competition for jobs, the overthrow of socialism has, indeed, been something to celebrate. Equally, it has been welcomed by the feudal and industrial elite of the pre-socialist regimes whose estates and industrial concerns have been recovered. But they're a minority. Why should the rest of us celebrate our own mugging?

Prior to the dismantling of socialism, most people in the world were protected from the vicissitudes of the global capitalist market by central planning and high tariff barriers. But once socialism fell in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and with China marching resolutely down the capitalist road, the pool of unprotected labor available to transnational corporations expanded many times over. Today, a world labor force many times larger than the domestic pool of US workers — and willing to work dirt-cheap — awaits the world's corporations. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what the implications are for American workers and their counterparts in Germany, Britain and other Western countries: an intense competition of all against all for jobs and industry. Inevitably, incomes fall, benefits are eroded, and working hours extended. Predictably, with labor costs heading south, profits grow fat.

Already, growing competition for jobs and industry is forcing workers in Western Europe to accept less. Workers at Daimler Chrysler, Thomas Cook, and other firms are working longer hours, and in some cases, for less pay and without increases in benefits, to keep jobs from moving to the Czech Republic, Slovakia and other former socialist countries — which, under the rule of the Reds, used to provide jobs to all. More work for less money is a pleasing outcome for the corporate class, and turns out to be exactly the outcome the fascists of Germany and Italy engineered for their countries' capitalists in the '30s. The methods, to be sure, were different, but the anti-communism of Mussolini's and Hitler's followers, in other hands, has proved just as useful in securing the same retrograde ends. Nobody who has to subject themselves to the vagaries of the labor market - including workers in the United States — should be glad communism was abolished.

Maybe some of us don't know we've been mugged. And maybe some of us haven't been. Take the radical American historian Howard Zinn, for example, who, along with most other prominent Left intellectuals, greeted the overthrow of communism with glee[1]. I, no less than others, have admired Zinn's books, articles and activism, though I've come to expect his ardent anti-communism as typical of left US intellectuals. To be sure, in a milieu so hostile to communism, it

should come as no surprise that conspicuous displays of anti-communism become a survival strategy for those seeking to establish a rapport, and safeguard their reputations, with a larger (and vehemently anti-communist) audience.

But there may be another reason for the anti-communism of those whose political views leave them open to charges of being soft on communism, and therefore of having horns. As dissidents in their own society, there was always a natural tendency for them to identify with dissidents elsewhere — and the pro-capitalist, anti-socialist propaganda of the West quite naturally elevated dissidents in socialist countries to the status of heroes, especially those who were jailed, muzzled and otherwise repressed by the State. For these people, the abridgement of civil liberties anywhere looms large, for the abridgement of their own civil liberties would be an event of great personal significance. By comparison, the Red's achievements in providing a comfortable frugality and economic security to all, while recognized intellectually as an achievement of some note, is less apt to stir the imagination of one who has an income, the respect of his peers, and plenty of people to read his books and attend his lectures. He doesn't have to scavenge discarded coal in garbage dumps to eke out a bare, bleak, and unrewarding existence. Some do.

Karol, 14, and his sister Alina, 12, everyday trudge to a dump, where mixed industrial waste is deposited, just outside Swietochlowice, in formerly socialist Poland. There, along with their father, they look for scrap metal and second grade coal, anything to fetch a few dollars to buy a meager supply of groceries. "There was better life in communism," says Karol's father, 49, repeating a refrain heard over and over again, not only in Poland, but also throughout the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. "I was working 25 years for the same company and now I cannot find a job — any job. They only want young and skilled workers." [2] According to Gustav Molnar, a political analyst with the Laszlo Teleki Institute, "the reality is that when foreign firms come here, they're only interested in hiring people under 30. It means half the population is out of the game." [3] That may suit the bottom lines of foreign corporations — and the overthrow of socialism may be a pleasing intellectual outcome for well-fed, comfortable intellectuals from Boston — but it hardly suits that part of the Polish population that must scramble over mountains of industrial waste — or perish. Under socialism "there was always work for everybody." [4] And always a place to live, free schools to go to, and doctors to see, without charge. So why is Howard Zinn glad communism collapsed?

That the overthrow of socialism has failed to deliver anything of benefit to the majority is plain to see. More than a decade after counterrevolution swept through Eastern Europe, 17 former socialist countries are immeasurably poorer. In Russia, poverty has tripled. One child in 10 — three million Russian children — live like animals, ill-fed, dressed in rags, and living, if they're lucky, in dirty, squalid flats. In Moscow alone, 30,000 to 50,000 children sleep in the streets. Life expectancy, education, adult-literacy and income are in decline. A report by the European Children's Trust, written in 2000, revealed that 40 percent of the population of the former socialist countries — 160 million people — lives in poverty. Infant mortality and tuberculosis are on the rise, approaching Third World levels. The situation, according to the UN, is catastrophic. And everywhere the story is the same. [5, 6, 7, 8]

In Russia, the Kremlin passed a new labor code in 2001 that critics denounced as Dickensian — for good reason. Aimed at creating a climate conducive to profit-making, Soviet-era union guarantees were abolished, maternity leaves shortened, the minimum wage slashed, and the working day lengthened to a "voluntary" 12 hours. [9] "Life was better under the Communists," concludes Aleksandr. "The stores are full of things, but they're very expensive." Victor pines for the "stability of an earlier era of affordable health care, free higher education and housing, and the promise of a comfortable retirement — things now beyond his reach." [10] That Aleksandr and Victor are now free to denounce the new government in the strongest terms, if they wish, hardly seems to be a consolation.

Ion Vancea, a Romanian who struggles to get by on a paltry \$40 per month pension says, "It's true there was not much to buy back then, but now prices are so high we can't afford to buy food as well as pay for electricity." Echoing the words of many in Romania, Vancea adds, "Life was 10 times better under (Romanian Communist Party leader) Ceausescu." [11]

Next door, in Bulgaria, 80 percent are worse off now that the country has transitioned to a market economy. Only five percent say their standard of living has improved. [12] Mimi Vitkova, briefly Bulgaria's health minister for two years in the mid-90s, sums up the decade following the overthrow of socialism: "We were never a rich country, but when we had socialism our children were healthy and well-fed. They all got immunized. Retired people and the disabled were provided for and got free medicine. Our hospitals were free." But things have changed, she says. "Today, if a person has no money, they have no right to be cured. And most people have no money. Our economy was ruined." [13]

In East Germany a new phenomenon has arisen: Ostalgie, a nostalgia based on the old regime's full employment, free health care, free education through university (with living expenses covered by the State), cheap rents, subsidized books and periodicals and dirt-cheap public transportation. During the Cold War era, East Germany's relative poverty was attributed to public ownership and central planning — sawdust in the gears of the economic engine, according to anti-socialist mythology. But the propaganda conveniently ignored the fact that the eastern part of Germany had always been less developed than the west, that it had been plundered of its key human assets at the end of World War II by US

occupation forces, that the Soviet Union had carted off everything of value to indemnify itself for its war losses, and that East Germany bore the brunt of war reparations to Moscow.[14] On top of that, those who fled East Germany were said to be escaping the repression of a brutal regime, and while some may indeed have been ardent anti-Communists fleeing repression by the State, many were economic refugees, seeking the embrace of a more prosperous West.

Today, nobody of an unprejudiced mind would say that the riches promised East Germans, if only they would restore capitalism, have been realized. Unemployment, once unheard of, runs at 25 percent, rents have skyrocketed, and nobody goes to the doctor unless they can pay. The region's industrial infrastructure — weaker than West Germany's during the Cold War, but expanding — has now all but disappeared. And the population is dwindling, as economic refugees, following in the footsteps of Cold War refugees before them, make their way westward in search of jobs and opportunity.[15] “We were taught that capitalism was cruel,” recalls Ralf Caemmerer, who works for Otis Elevator. “You know, it didn't turn out to be nonsense.”[16] As to the claim that East Germans have “freedom” Heinz Kessler, a former East German defense minister replies tartly, “Millions of people in Eastern Europe are now free from employment, free from safe streets, free from health care, free from social security.”[17] Still, Howard Zinn is glad communism collapsed. But then, he doesn't live in east Germany.

So, who's doing better? Otto Jelinek, a Czech whose family fled to Canada after the Red Army booted the Nazis out and helped install an antifascist government, became a cabinet minister in Canada's conservative, pro-Reagan Mulroney government in the 80s. Today he lives in Prague, one of “many individuals in positions of high influence, in politics, in business [who] have moved back to the country.”[18] What brings Jelinek, and his fellow movers and shakers back? “These people understand that they better than almost anyone help our nation make the transition to a market economy,” says the director of the Institute for Contemporary History in Prague, Oldrich Tuma,[19] another way of saying that owing to their connections, they, more than others, know there's a buck to be made and how to make it. And, of course, there's the lure of restitution-getting back property, some of it, which can be pressed into service as a rent-bearing asset they and their families used to own. Jelinek didn't recover his old family home. It's an embassy, and hence would have proved to be a spacious, comfortable abode for the Jelinek family in its day, but the Czech government “did return 20 acres of real estate outside of Prague.”[20]

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright turned President, comes from a prominent, vehemently anti-socialist Prague family. Havel's father was a wealthy real estate tycoon, who developed a number of Prague properties. One was the Lucerna Palace, “a pleasure palace of arcades, theatres, cinemas, night-clubs, restaurants, and ballrooms,” according to Frommer's. It became “a popular spot for the city's nouveau riche to congregate,” including a young Havel, who, raised in the lap of luxury by a governess and chauffeured around town, “spent his earliest years on the Lucerna's polished marble floors.” Then, tragedy struck — at least, from Havel's point of view. The Reds expropriated Lucerna and the family's other holdings, and put them to use for the common good, rather than for the purpose of providing the young Havel with more servants. Four decades later, Havel, as president — and now celebrated throughout the West as a champion of intellectual freedom — presided over a mass return of nationalized property, including Lucerna and his family's other holdings. As a business investment, Havel's anti-communism proved to be quite profitable. Is he a champion of intellectual freedom, or the formerly pampered scion of an establishment family who had a material stake in seeing socialism overthrown?

The Roman Catholic Church is another winner, which may explain, in part, why the Vatican takes such a dim view of communism. The pro-capitalist Hungarian government has returned to the Roman Catholic Church much of the property nationalized by the Reds, who placed the property under common ownership for the public good. With recovery of many of the Eastern and Central European properties it once owned, the Church is able to reclaim its pre-socialist role of parasite — raking in vast amounts of unearned wealth in rent, a privilege bestowed for no other reason than it owns title to the land. Hungary also pays the Vatican a US\$9.2 million annuity for property it has been unable to return.[21]

The Church, former landowners, and CEOs aside, just people of the former socialist bloc aren't pleased that the gains of the socialist revolutions have been reversed. Three-quarters of Russians, according to a 1999 poll[22] regret the demise of the Soviet Union. And their assessment of the status quo is refreshingly clear-sighted. Almost 80 percent recognize democracy as a front for a government controlled by the rich. A majority (correctly) identifies the cause of its impoverishment as an unjust economic system (capitalism), which, according to 80 percent, produces “excessive and illegitimate inequalities.”[23] The solution, in the view of the majority, is to return to the status quo ante (socialism), even if it means one-party rule. Russians, laments the anti-Communist historian Richard Pipes, haven't Americans' taste for multiparty democracy, and seem incapable of being cured of their fondness for Soviet leaders. In one poll, Russians were asked to list the 10 greatest people of all time, of all nations. Lenin came in second, Stalin fourth (Peter the Great came first). Pipes seems genuinely distressed they didn't pick his old boss, Ronald Reagan, and is fed up that after years of anti-socialist, pro-capitalist propaganda, Russians remain committed to the idea that private economic activity should be restricted, and “the government [needs] to be more involved in the country's economic life.”[24]

So, if the impoverished peoples of the formerly socialist countries pine for the former attractions of socialism, why don't they vote the Reds back in? In some countries, reconstituted Communist parties have received popular mandates to

govern. And in Russia, Unity and Fatherland, the party that has become the parliamentary extension of the president, Vladimir Putin, has tapped into a deep well of nostalgia for Soviet socialism. "They've managed to create a new party of power, which in fact is replacing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," says Boris Kagarlitsky, director of the Moscow-based Institute of Globalization Studies. "It functions like the old Communist Party; it looks like the old Communist Party; it behaves like the old Communist Party." [25]

But socialism can't be turned on with the flick of a switch (not that the Unity and Fatherland party would, if it could.) The former socialist economies have been mostly privatized and placed under the control of the market. Those who accept the goals and values of capitalism have been recruited to occupy pivotal offices of the State. And economic, legal and political structures have been altered, to accommodate private production for profit. True, there are openings for communist parties to operate within the new multiparty democracy, but the pillars of socialism — public ownership, central planning, and the lead role of the working class — have been dismantled and carted away, tossed, we're told, into the dustbin of history. Getting them back will take something more than returning Reds to parliament.

Of course, no forward step will be taken, can be taken, until a decisive part of the population becomes disgusted with and rejects what exists today, and is convinced something better is possible and is willing to tolerate the upheavals of transition. That something better is indeed possible — not a utopia, but something better than unceasing economic insecurity, private (and for many, unaffordable) health care and education, and vast inequality — is plain. It has been reality in the Soviet Union, in China (for a time), in Eastern Europe, and today, hangs on in Cuba, despite the incessant and far-ranging efforts of the United States to smash it.

It should be no surprise that Vaclav Havel, as others whose economic and political supremacy was, for a time, ended by the Reds, was a tireless fighter against socialism, or that he, and others, who sought to reverse the gains of the revolution, were cracked down on, and sometimes muzzled and jailed by the new regimes. To expect otherwise is to turn a blind eye to the determined struggle that is carried on by the enemies of socialism, even after socialist forces have seized power. The forces of reaction retain their money, their movable property, the advantages of education, and above all, their international connections. To grant them complete freedom is to grant them a free hand to organize the downfall of socialism, to receive material assistance from abroad to reverse the revolution, and to elevate the market and private ownership once again to the regulating principles of the economy. Few champions of civil liberties argue that in the interests of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press, that Americans ought to be free to replace their republican form of government with a pro-British monarchy, or, more to the point, that Germans ought be allowed to hold pro-Nazi rallies, establish a pro-Nazi press, and organize fascist political parties, to return to the days of the Third Reich. To survive, any socialist government, must, of necessity, be repressive toward its enemies. This is demonized as totalitarianism by those who have an interest in seeing anti-socialist forces prevail, regard civil and political liberties (as against a world of plenty for all) as the summum bonum of human achievement, or have an unrealistically sanguine view of the possibilities for socialist survival.

Where Reds have prevailed, the outcome has been far-reaching material gains for the bulk of the population: full employment, free health care, free education through university, free and subsidized child care, cheap living accommodations and inexpensive public transportation. Life expectancy has soared, illiteracy has been wiped out, and homelessness, unemployment and economic insecurity have been abolished. Racial strife and ethnic tensions has been reduced to almost the vanishing point. And inequalities in wealth, income, opportunity, and education have been greatly reduced. Where Reds have been overthrown, mass unemployment, underdevelopment, hunger, disease, illiteracy, homelessness, and racial conflict have recrudesced. Communists produced gains in the interest of all humanity, achieved in the face of very trying conditions, including the unceasing hostility of the West and the unremitting efforts of the former exploiters to restore the status quo ante. What they achieved surpassed anything achieved by social democratic struggle in the West, where the advantages of being more advanced industrially, made the promises of socialism all the more readily achievable — and to a far greater degree than could be achieved elsewhere in the world. Hidden, or at best, acknowledged but quickly brushed aside as matters of little significance, these are achievements that have been too long ignored in the West — and greatly missed in the countries where they were reversed in the interests of restoring the wealth and privileges of a minority.

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