

"Lessons from a century of Communism" - Ilya Somin November 2017. The Washington Post

Today is the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power, which led to the establishment of a communist regime in Russia and eventually in many other nations around the world. It is an appropriate time to remember the vast tide of oppression, tyranny, and mass murder that communist regimes unleashed upon the world. While historians and others have documented numerous communist atrocities, much of the public remains unaware of their enormous scale. It is also a good time to consider what lessons we can learn from this horrendous history.

I. A Record of Mass Murder and Oppression.

Collectively, communist states killed as many as 100 million people, more than all other repressive regimes combined during the same time period. By far the biggest toll arose from communist efforts to collectivize agriculture and eliminate independent property-owning peasants. In China alone, Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward led to a man-made famine in which as many as 45 million people perished - the single biggest episode of mass murder in all of world history. In the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin's collectivization - which served as a model for similar efforts in China and elsewhere - took some 6 to 10 million lives. Mass famines occurred in many other communist regimes, ranging from North Korea to Ethiopia. In each of these cases, communist rulers were well aware that their policies were causing mass death, and in each they persisted nonetheless, often because they considered the extermination of "Kulak" peasants a feature rather than a bug.

II. Why Communism Failed.

How did an ideology of liberation lead to so much oppression, tyranny and death? Were its failures intrinsic to the communist project, or did they arise from avoidable flaws of particular rulers or nations? Like any great historical development, the failures of communism cannot be reduced to any one single cause. But, by and large, they were indeed inherent.

Two major factors were the most important causes of the atrocities inflicted by communist regimes: perverse incentives and inadequate knowledge. The establishment of the centrally planned economy and society required by socialist ideology necessitated an enormous concentration of power. While communists looked forward to a utopian society in which the state could eventually "wither away," they believed they first had to establish a state-run economy in order to manage production in the interests of the people. In that respect, they had much in common with other socialists.

To make socialism work, government planners needed to have the authority to direct the production and distribution of virtually all the goods produced by the society. In addition, extensive coercion was necessary to force people to give up their private property, and do the work that the state required. Famine and mass murder was probably the only way the rulers of the USSR, China, and other communist states could compel peasants to give up their land and livestock and accept a new form of serfdom on collective farms - which most were then forbidden to leave without official permission, for fear that they might otherwise seek an easier life elsewhere.



The vast power necessary to establish and maintain the communist system naturally attracted unscrupulous people, including many self-seekers who prioritized their own interests over those of the cause. But it is striking that the biggest communist atrocities were perpetrated not by corrupt party bosses, but by true believers like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. Precisely because they were true believers, they were willing to do whatever it might take to make their utopian dreams a reality.

Even as the socialist system created opportunities for vast atrocities by the rulers, it also destroyed production incentives for ordinary people. In the absence of markets (at least legal ones), there was little incentive for workers to either be productive or to focus on making goods that might actually be useful to consumers. Many people tried to do as little work as possible at their official jobs, where possible reserving their real efforts for black market activity. As the old Soviet saying goes, workers had the attitude that "we pretend to work, and they pretend to pay."

III. Why the Failure Cannot be Explained Away.

To this day, defenders of socialist central planning argue that communism failed for avoidable contingent reasons, rather than ones intrinsic to the nature of the system. Perhaps the most popular claim of this sort is that a planned economy can work well so long as it is democratic. The Soviet Union and other communist states were all dictatorships. But if they had been democratic, perhaps the leaders would have had stronger incentives to make the system work for the benefit of the people.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a communist state could remain democratic for long, even it started out that way. Democracy requires effective opposition parties. And in order to function, such parties need to be able to put out their message and mobilize voters, which in turn requires extensive resources. In an economic system in which all or nearly all valuable resources are controlled by the state, the incumbent government can easily strangle opposition by denying them access to those resources. Under socialism, the opposition cannot function if they are not allowed to spread their message on state-owned media, or use state-owned property for their rallies and meetings. It is no accident that virtually every communist regime suppressed opposition parties soon after coming to power.

Another possible explanation for the failures of communism is that the problem was bad leadership. If only communist regimes were not led by monsters like Stalin or Mao, they might have done better. There is no doubt communist governments had more than their share of cruel and even sociopathic leaders. But it is unlikely that this was the decisive factor in their failure. Very similar results arose in communist regimes with leaders who had a wide range of personalities. In the Soviet Union, it is important to remember that the main institutions of repression (including the Gulags and the secret police) were established not by Stalin, but by Vladimir Lenin, a far more "normal" person. After Lenin's death, Stalin's main rival for power - Leon Trotsky - advocated policies that were in some respects even more oppressive than Stalin's own. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that either the personality of the leader was not the main factor, or - alternatively - communist regimes tended to put horrible people to positions of power. Or perhaps some of both.

It is equally difficult to credit claims that communism failed only because of defects in the culture of the countries that adopted it. It is indeed true that Russia, the first communist nation, had a long history of corruption, authoritarianism, and oppression. But it is also true that the communists engaged in oppression and mass murder on a far greater scale than previous Russian governments. And communism also failed in many other nations with very different cultures. In the cases of Korea, China, and Germany, people with very similar initial cultural backgrounds endured terrible privation under communism, but were much more successful under market economies.

Overall, the atrocities and failures of communism were the natural outcomes of an effort to establish a socialist economy in which all or nearly all production is controlled by the state. If not always completely unavoidable, the resulting oppression was at least highly likely.

