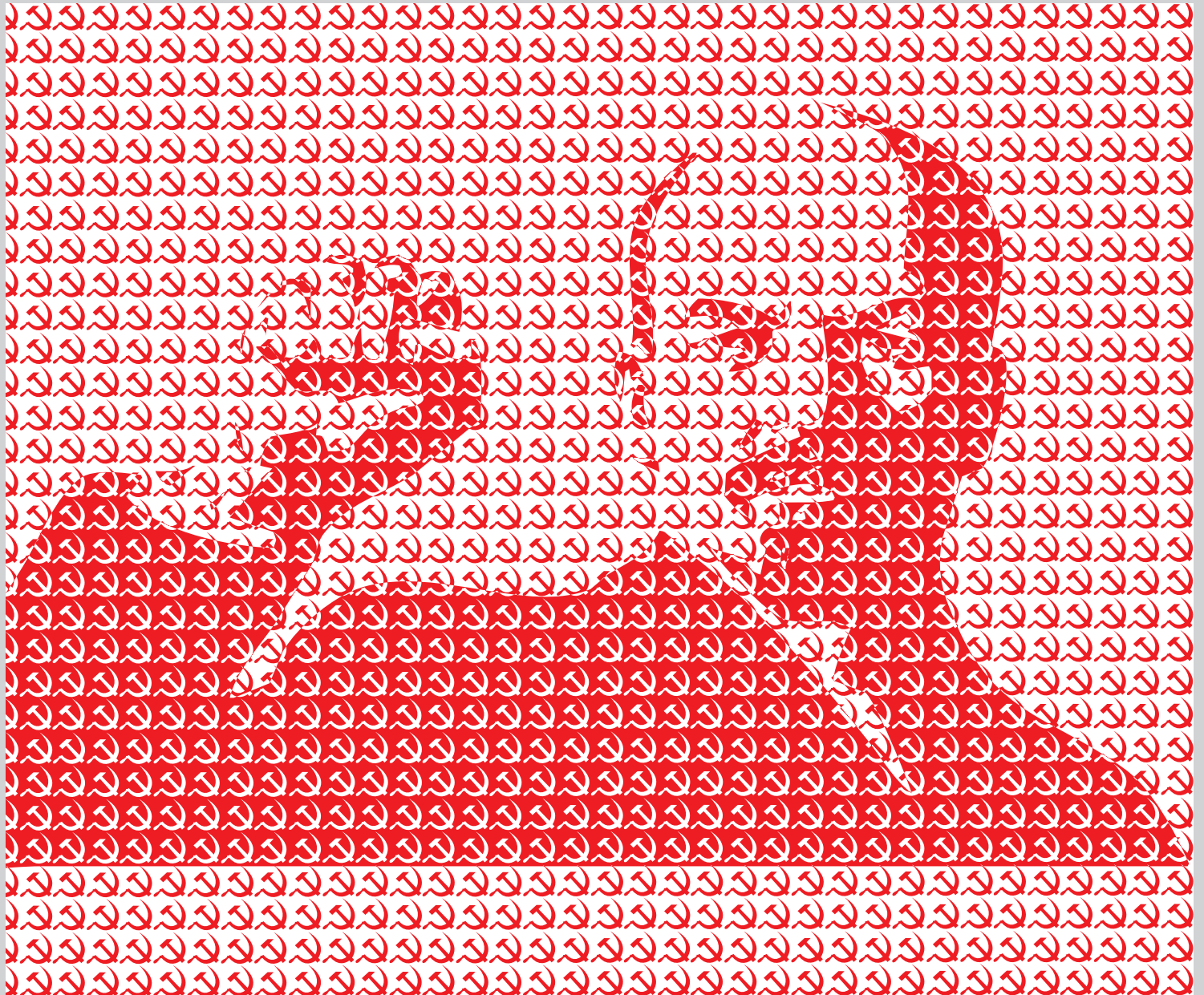




The Second Time as Farce:  
The crimes of communism,  
retro-Bolshevism and the centenary  
of the 1917 Russian Revolution



Dennis Sewell



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retro-Bolshevism and the centenary  
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## About the author

Dennis Sewell is an author, broadcaster and contributing editor of the *Spectator*. He spent more than twenty years on the staff of BBC News, where he presented Radio 4's *Talking Politics*, BBC World Service's *Politics UK*, worked as a reporter for BBC 2's *Newsnight* and was an award-winning documentary maker. His latest book is *The Political Gene* (Picador, 2010).

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Designed by sarahbettsworthdesign@talktalk.net  
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

Published by the New Culture Forum

New Culture Forum Ltd  
55 Tufton Street  
London SW1P 3QL  
Tel: 0207 340 6059  
[www.newcultureforum.org.uk](http://www.newcultureforum.org.uk)

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Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

Exchange between Michael Ignatieff and Professor Eric Hobsbawm:<sup>2</sup>

**Ignatieff:** In 1934 ... millions of people are dying in the Soviet experiment. If you had known that, would it have made a difference to you at that time? To your commitment? To being a communist?

**Hobsbawm:** ... Probably not.

**Ignatieff:** Why?

**Hobsbawm:** Because in a period in which, as you might say, mass murder and mass suffering are absolutely universal, the chance of a new world being born in great suffering would still have been worth backing ... The sacrifices were enormous; they were excessive by almost any standard and unnecessarily great. But I'm looking back on it now and I'm saying that is because it turns out that the Soviet Union was *not* the beginning of the world revolution. Had it been, I'm not sure ...

**Ignatieff:** What that comes down to is saying that had the radiant tomorrow actually been created, the loss of fifteen, twenty million people might have been justified?

**Hobsbawm:** Yes.

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# 1

## Introduction: The Left redux

On 13 February 2015, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev complained that tensions over Syria and the Ukraine were pushing Russia and the West into ‘a new Cold War’. Reporting Medvedev’s remarks, BBC News decided to gloss a term that might be unfamiliar to parts of its audience. ‘The Cold War was a period of ideological confrontation between the former Soviet Union and Western countries’, our national broadcaster explained. ‘It began after World War Two and ended with the collapse of the Soviet-led communist camp in the early 1990s.’<sup>3</sup>

It is good to be clear about such things. But to those of us who were children of the Cold War, it is somewhat dispiriting that such an elucidation should be necessary. Yet we must face the fact that a new generation has grown up since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War has receded into memory, and even into History (with a capital ‘H’), becoming a topic on the public examination syllabus, alongside the event that gave rise to the Soviet Union in the first place – the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Many of the actors, events and controversies that dominated the national conversation for our generation, which grew up in the shadow of the hydrogen bomb, are now often completely unknown to a young cohort, even though it has grown up in the light of Wikipedia. The stark revelation of the extent of its ignorance, as demonstrated in the New Culture Forum’s *Survation* poll on political ideologies (specially commissioned for this report), will surely deliver a jolt.

For me, the communist threat was personal. I was born in the Middle East, into a cauldron of superpower rivalries. Almost my first memory is of bullets coming through the bedroom wall, fired by Russian-backed insurgents trying to kill my family.

Later, I spent my teenage years on a number of British military bases in Germany. Sometimes I would take a walk through the woods to a spot where you could see a long stretch of the inner German border, that brutal reality on the ground where the Iron Curtain was not a metaphor.

The sight of the dispositions of the wire, minefields and watchtowers – unarguably designed to keep the East German population in, rather than unwanted intruders out – provided political orientation and moral clarity, as well as insulation against any sophistry that might be deployed to excuse it all.

Looking back, I rather think that on a macro scale the Cold War provided something of that clarity for our whole society in those times. We were in no doubt what our values were; we knew what we believed in and what they believed in; and we could be sure that we, being on the side of freedom, were on the right side.

**“Communism didn’t work. And most people who lived under it hated it. These are not passing objections. They will need to be relearned as the centenary of the Russian revolution approaches”**

Martin Kettle<sup>4</sup>

We could define and test ourselves against an ideological Other, which was quite obviously a beast. We knew the communists had murdered their way to power; and once in place, had kept on murdering to sustain themselves there. Robert Conquest showed us that Marxist ideology had supplied the motivation for mass murder on an unprecedented scale. We knew that across that fence the Stasi were still persecuting their own people, had built them a prison and were forcing them to stay in it on pain of death.

Then quite suddenly it was all over. One November night in 1989 there were people dancing on the wall. Thank you Cruise; thank you Pershing. Kudos too, of course, to the people of the German Democratic Republic, who made their own revolution – one that reunited first Berlin, then all Germany, and that symbolized the liberation of half of Europe – with no killing at all.



There was precious little in the way of reckoning at the end of the Cold War, and certainly nothing on the scale of Nuremberg. As for all the fellow travellers and apologists for communism in the West, should we not have held them to account for their complicity in the crimes of communism? Just a tiny bit? Didn't we let the Left get away with murder?

**“The main lesson seems to be that the Communist ideology provided the motivation for an unprecedented massacre of men, women and children”**

Robert Conquest<sup>5</sup>

I have not been able to run the quotation to ground, but many years ago I read somewhere that, in the opinion of the writer, anyone who joined the Communist Party after Czechoslovakia was 'lacking something as a human being'.

And by 'after Czechoslovakia', I think he meant 1948, not 1968. The other day I met someone who had joined the Party in 1982! It was hard not to laugh, but then I remembered that concentration camps were still operating in the Soviet Union well into the 1980s, and it didn't seem so funny after all.

And yet no social stigma attaches to former communists – not even to those who still wilfully and shamefully persist in stretching the folly of their junior common room politics to be the shame of middle age.

Jeremy Corbyn goes about in a Lenin hat and no one turns a hair.

The faculty of moral discernment in political matters will, if not regularly employed, tend to atrophy – just like a muscle that is not exercised. Which is why perhaps today we struggle to define 'British values' when we need to, and why the trumpet has sometimes sounded an uncertain call at the approach of a new, vicious Other in the form of radical, political Islamism.

Today we find the British Left making excuses for Islamofascism with the same self-righteous enthusiasm that it employed when making excuses for communist totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Whereas once it fawned over Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Castro, today it lionizes homophobic imams and jihadis. What the old and new comrades share, of course, is a hatred of the Judeo-Christian heritage and culture of the United States.

For a while it really did seem that the free-market resurgence of the Thatcher–Reagan years, combined with the collapse of communism, had done for socialism for good. With Francis Fukuyama writing about the end of history, and the Labour Party set on a process of renewal that would culminate in its almost miraculous transmutation into New Labour, it was all up for the commissars, the bureaucrats and the central planners.

It was all up for the would-be revolutionaries, too. They were packed off to the universities to talk among themselves.

But over the past eight years it has become apparent that we have only scotched the snake, not killed it. The financial crash of 2008 appeared in apocalyptic terms to significant numbers of people as the terminal crisis of capitalism. Booksellers reported an unprecedented demand for copies of *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Every low-rent Lenin started to see a revolutionary moment just around the corner. Soon a spectre was haunting Europe: his name was Thomas Piketty and he, too, had a book to sell.

The runaway success of Greece's Syriza, coming from only 4.6% of the vote in the 2009 election to form the government of the country in January 2015, showed that if the crisis is severe enough, even a ramshackle coalition of communists, Trotskyists, radical environmentalists and academic economists can win real political power. The result has been a surge of confidence on the Left and the growth of a sense of expectation, even entitlement. Socialism is well and truly back and is helping to shape the

debate in British society. Even the guy outside the station, who for years has been trying to get you to buy a copy of *Socialist Worker*, now feels the hand of destiny on his shoulder.

These thoughts and sentiments are widely shared across our continent. In the southern parts of the Eurozone, where the crisis has bitten deep, where youth unemployment can exceed 40% and where the word ‘austerity’ really means something, it is perhaps easy to see why people might brave the tear gas and take to the streets, and why they might think the whole edifice of the capitalist economy is collapsing.

But in Britain, total public spending has been cut back not to the levels of the Middle Ages, but to where it was in Tony Blair’s second term (and no one called it ‘austerity’ then). In Britain, a supposedly collapsing capitalism is generating millions of new jobs and is continuing to lift billions of people out of poverty in the developing world. Here, the screaming and spitting mobs of angry socialists outside the Conservative Party Conference look like spoilt and callow youngsters who haven’t really taken the time to properly understand the repayment terms of their student loans.

But it is done now. By taking part in campaigns such as Stop the War, Occupy, People’s Assembly or other such, many people have, often unwittingly, been attending what amount to schools of radicalism.

**“Ideas that we thought were dead and buried have burst out of their coffins and come shambling back to the frontline of British politics”**

Matthew Hancock

The most significant concrete development to arise out of this new mood was the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in September 2015. ‘For the first time in my life, we have

the leader of a mainstream political party who rejects the basic tenets of the free market’, said Minister for the Cabinet Office Matthew Hancock, responding to Corbyn’s victory. ‘Ideas that we thought were dead and buried have burst out of their coffins and come shambling back to the frontline of British politics ... [I]t falls to us and to our generation to make anew the case for liberty, for progress and for the free markets upon which any strong and fulfilled society depends.’<sup>6</sup>

As will be shown later in this report, the changes in the Labour Party attendant on Corbyn’s victory have blurred the lines between the traditional reformist socialism of the Labour Party and the Marxist revolutionary socialism of the hard Left.

A new generation may be being exposed to the ideas of the revolutionary Left in the context of ordinary Labour Party activism.

It may well prove to be a good and healthy thing for this generation to make again the case for capitalism from first principles. In doing so, we should take a long look at the alternatives. There is not any successful socialist economy anywhere in the world, and there never has been. But economic performance, important though it is, should not be our only concern. There is a moral calculus, too. The various attempts during the twentieth century to construct communist utopias led to the death of so many millions of our fellow human beings. They should not be just an afterthought, or dealt with in parentheses.

The coming centenary of the Russian Revolution offers an opportunity to compare ideologies in the context of the national conversation, to stimulate a debate about where Marxism-Leninism went so tragically wrong. This report looks at how we should mark that anniversary in a way that does justice to the victims of communism, and at how the resonances of the revolution still have a salience in our politics today.

The saying ‘one death is a tragedy; thousands of deaths is a statistic’ is one that is frequently

attributed to Stalin. It is something we need to bear in mind as we struggle to comprehend the awful scale of the atrocities we have to consider.

The following is an approximation of the number of civilian deaths attributable to communism, based on official estimates by the compilers of the *Black Book of Communism*, a scholarly examination of the crimes of communism that was used to inform the drafting and consideration of the Council of Europe's Resolution 1481 (2006):

- USSR: 20 million deaths
- China: 65 million deaths
- Vietnam: 1 million deaths
- North Korea: 2 million deaths
- Cambodia: 2 million deaths
- Eastern Europe: 1 million deaths
- Latin America: 150,000 deaths
- Africa: 1.7 million deaths
- Afghanistan: 1.5 million deaths
- The international communist movement and communist parties not in power: about 10,000 deaths.

The total number of people killed approaches 100 million. 🌀

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# 2

## Results and analysis of the New Culture Forum ideologies poll

Towards the end of 2015, the New Culture Forum engaged a firm of pollsters to undertake a survey of the immediate post-communism generation. The best fit among the standard demographic segments available was the 16 to 24 age group, encompassing young people born in the years from 1991 to 1999, inclusive.<sup>7</sup>

The oldest of the sample will have been born in the same year as the dissolution of the Soviet Union; the youngest, a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Those attending state schools in England and Wales began their secondary education between 2002 and 2010 and took their GCSE examinations from 2006 to 2014. All will have been old enough to vote in Labour's 2015 leadership election.

Our questions sought to explore a range of attitudes among the respondents towards ideas and individuals connected to the history and ideology of communism during the twentieth century. We also included some jokers in the pack – other ideas systems and historical figures – in order to establish bases for comparison and contrast.

We were interested in discovering respondents' moral assessments, as well as their political ones; and although an opinion poll is not at all like a quiz, we were also able to obtain information about the extent of young people's knowledge (and, by the same token, ignorance) of personalities and events in recent history. This was achieved by offering a 'have not heard of' option, where appropriate.

Those taking part in the poll were presented with the names of 22 historical figures and asked to indicate whether, if they had heard of the person, they associated that name with crimes against humanity or not.

One of the most striking things to emerge from the responses was how contemporary people and events, or those proximate in time, so comprehensively overshadow even the relatively recent past.

**A significantly larger proportion of respondents associated George W. Bush (39%) and Tony Blair (34%) with crimes against humanity than Pol Pot (only 19%)**

Table 1 (below) confirms that campaigns such as those mounted by the *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot and the Stop the War Coalition have been successful in associating in the public mind the 2003 liberation of Iraq with war crimes.

The legality of the Iraq invasion is, of course, still hotly contested. Disputes about whether what was implicit in UN Security Council Resolution 1441 and earlier resolutions was enough to justify a war may never be definitively settled.

What ought to be beyond dispute, though, is that even if the war was illegal, that illegality was of only brief duration. The invasion began on 23 March 2003; major combat operations ceased approximately six weeks later, on 1 May.

Shortly afterwards, the UN passed a resolution placing the occupation of Iraq on a legal footing and establishing a mandate for the multinational force. The occupation itself formally ended on 30 June 2004, when responsibility for government was passed back to the Iraqis.<sup>8</sup>

This means that, for almost the whole of the period that US and British forces were engaged in military operations in Iraq, either their presence was authorized by one or another UN Security Council resolution, or they had been asked to be there by the legitimate and elected government of Iraq, or both.

During the six-week period that does remain a matter of contention, there were no deliberate massacres of civilians or other equivalent outrages that could fairly be described as crimes against humanity. Moreover, the invasion was one of the most transparent military operations ever conducted, with journalists and television crews embedded in frontline units.

**Table 1**

**Q. For each of the following figures, please indicate whether you would associate them with crimes against humanity, or not, or if you have not heard of them**

Person	Associate with crimes against humanity	Do not associate with crimes against humanity	Have not heard
Slobodan Milošević	13%	9%	78%
Adolf Hitler	87%	5%	8%
General Pinochet	15%	7%	78%
Vladimir Putin	50%	29%	22%
Ronald Reagan	12%	52%	36%
George W. Bush	39%	50%	11%
F.W. de Klerk	7%	10%	83%
General de Gaulle	9%	22%	69%
Benjamin Netanyahu	14%	14%	72%
Mengistu Haile Mariam	7%	7%	86%
Tony Blair	34%	55%	11%
Barack Obama	10%	83%	7%
Gerry Adams	13%	15%	72%
Ian Paisley	9%	18%	73%
Che Guevara	13%	27%	59%
Leon Trotsky	15%	20%	65%
Pol Pot	19%	9%	72%
Joseph Stalin	61%	11%	28%
Mao Zedong	20%	10%	70%
Vladimir Lenin	31%	20%	49%
Saddam Hussein	75%	7%	18%
President Assad	42%	13%	45%

By contrast, during the years 1975 to 1978, when Pol Pot ruled Cambodia, 2–3 million people were killed, some 1.3 million of them deliberately murdered for political reasons.

These crimes are not fanciful flights of rhetoric. They are not the debased currency of junior common room politics. They are real events that have been exhaustively investigated and whose scale is well attested. Actual war crimes trials have taken place. Indeed, the two most senior Khmer Rouge leaders to be convicted in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia were sentenced as recently as August 2014.

The *New York Times* correspondent Sydney Schanberg (on whose experiences the harrowing 1984 Roland Joffé film *The Killing Fields* was based) wrote at the outset of Pol Pot's rule that 'the barbarous cruelty of the Khmer Rouge can be compared with the extermination of the Kulaks or the Gulag Archipelago'.<sup>9</sup>

Even before the slaughter began, the Khmer Rouge were already perpetrating a crime against humanity with their forced evacuation of the whole civilian population from Cambodia's cities: a brutal act that made no attempt to spare even the most vulnerable citizens. 'I shall never forget one cripple who had neither hands nor feet, writhing along the ground like a severed worm,' reported one eyewitness of the forced marches into the countryside, 'or a weeping father carrying his ten-year-old daughter wrapped in a sheet tied round his neck like a sling, or the man with his foot dangling at the end of a leg to which it was attached by nothing but the skin.'<sup>10</sup>

Once the population had been assembled in the country, Pol Pot's project of establishing an agrarian socialist utopia began; and so did the massacres. The Khmer Rouge murdered doctors, teachers, librarians and other professionals as a matter of policy. Anyone who wore spectacles was at risk. When civil servants who had worked for the previous regime were captured, they were promptly shot; then their executioners would trace every surviving member

of their family and kill them, too. The process was termed 'purification'. But all the while the slaughter was taking place, many academics, writers and journalists in the West were playing down its extent – or even denying that it was taking place at all.

The former *Guardian* journalist, Richard Gott, who had to resign from the paper in 1994 after details of his relationship with the Soviet KGB were revealed in the *Spectator*, told an interviewer that articles he had written supportive of Pol Pot were merely '*jeux d'esprit*, pieces written against the tide'.<sup>11</sup>

You might think that in the context of genocide something more solemn than a playful striking of political attitudes was called for. As for Richard Gott's claim to have been saying anything special or different, the writer William Shawcross promptly took issue with that: 'While the Khmer Rouge was in power, murdering or causing the deaths of over a million people between 1975 and 1978 ... Mr Gott was swimming against no tide; he was in the mainstream of the Left.'<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, Noam Chomsky was at the time pointing to 'highly qualified specialists, who have studied the full range of evidence available, and who concluded that executions have numbered at most in the thousands'.<sup>13</sup>

Malcolm Caldwell, an economic historian at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, took a similar line to Chomsky. Writing in the *Guardian* in the early summer of 1978, the British academic dismissed reports of the genocide as American propaganda. Those fleeing Cambodia and claiming to be eyewitnesses to the genocide, he thought, had an agenda that rendered their testimony suspect: 'Refugees will willingly subscribe to atrocity stories, even if they have not personally witnessed them, when attestation secures the promise of settlement where their money and jewels count for more than in revolutionary Kampuchea.' The executions he did acknowledge had been of 'arch-Quislings'.<sup>14</sup>

'Something in Dr Caldwell *needs* to believe that



Cambodia under the genocidal dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge is Kampuchea under democracy,' responded *The Times* columnist Bernard Levin. 'Whatever that need is, it is stronger than the facts and more tenacious than the evidence.'<sup>15</sup>

Caldwell was active in the Labour Party, and at the same time as he was cheerleading for Pol Pot, he was standing for election to his local council in Bexley. Caldwell found himself strongly attracted to Cambodia's radical egalitarianism and uniquely pure brand of socialism, where private property and even money were abolished; and to Pol Pot himself, whose political formation had taken place in the Paris of the 1950s, and whom the left-wing academic found a convivial companion over dinner.

But its ideological purity made Cambodian socialism all the more toxic. Every variety of socialism seeks to regulate, but the Khmer Rouge exerted more intense and focused power over every waking minute of its citizens' lives than any state had attempted before. A uniform timetable allocating set periods for physical labour, eating, education and sleep was established. It was as if the whole country was a concentration camp. Socialism's preference for the common or collective good over the rights of the individual was distilled into an absolute denial of the value of the individual human being in the Khmer Rouge slogan, spat into the faces of so many of its victims: *Losing you is not a loss; keeping you is no gain*.

Malcolm Caldwell naively believed that Cambodian socialism would provide an economic miracle. 'The Kampucheans will have the last laugh,' the Marxist economic historian reckoned, 'when countries like Britain, which grows only enough food to supply the needs of half the population, is thrown back on its own resources by the inevitable working out of international economic forces.'<sup>16</sup>

With hindsight, we know that he was wrong. In fact, the Khmer Rouge proved so incompetent at economic planning and agricultural production that many of their people starved to death, while others

descended into cannibalism. Hindsight, provided through the excavation of the mass graves, shows us that the mainstream Left was wrong about the genocide, too. But what use is hindsight when a generation has grown up, nearly three-quarters of whom have never even heard of Pol Pot? It is as if the world has become like a corner-shop CCTV system, where the tape of each day's history is automatically erased as the events of the following day are recorded on top of it. Worse, though, than the consequent amnesia is the fact that so many of the new generation appear to be making the same moral misjudgement as Malcolm Caldwell and many others of his kind: that Britain and America are the real monsters.

**“When I die, my only wish is that  
Cambodia belong to the West.  
It is over for communism”**

Pol Pot<sup>17</sup>

### **Seven out of every ten respondents said they had never heard of Mao Zedong**

This was one of the most alarming results of the survey. Such ignorance seems barely credible, particularly when it concerns someone who is regarded as the most prolific mass murderer in history, responsible for the death of tens of millions of human beings. It is possible that there was confusion attributable to the Romanization of his name; yet we had adopted the newer, standard formulation 'Mao Zedong', precisely because it should have been more familiar to a younger cohort than the older 'Mao Tse-tung'. It is conceivable that a higher level of name recognition might have been achieved with the more informal 'Chairman Mao'.

That said, Mao has plentiful (if not always 'good') company in his obscurity. Similar numbers confessed ignorance of Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,

even though they remain politically active; and an even larger number failed to recognize Slobodan Milošević and General Pinochet – despite their very distinctive names (see Table 1).

It is not wholly surprising that 83% failed to identify F.W. de Klerk, since he could be seen as having played only a bit part in history, as Nelson Mandela's foil.

Again, it is not surprising (though it is significant and consistent with an emerging theme) that 86% had not heard of Mengistu Haile Mariam. What is of more concern is that half of those who *had* heard of Mengistu did not associate his name with crimes against humanity, despite the fact that he is that rare thing: a tyrant who was actually tried and found guilty of genocide.

Mengistu was a communist strongman who, sustained in power by the KGB and the East German Stasi, was the de facto ruler of Ethiopia from 1977 right through to 1991. He had no qualms about using poison gas against his opponents or air power against civilian targets. His thuggish lieutenants would throttle political rivals with a distinctive nylon rope that became known as the 'Mengistu Bow Tie'.

During Mengistu's first year in office, a leading non-governmental organization (NGO) reported that the bodies of a thousand or more children were lying rotting in the streets or being eaten by wild dogs. This set the tone for a rule characterized by 'Red Terror', economic incompetence and mass starvation. Whether he was responsible for 'just' 500,000 deaths or for as many as 2 million is anyone's guess. When communism began to unravel in Ethiopia, as well as in Eastern Europe, Mengistu sought asylum in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. At the time of writing, he is still alive and still there. Mengistu was not widely known in Britain, even at the peak of his power, and now is plainly a name greeted mostly with a shrug.

That this should be true of Mengistu is unfortunate: how can we learn from the past if we know nothing about it? But if it is also really true of

Mao, then that is really a scandal.

By any reckoning, Mao must figure as one of the most prominent political figures of the twentieth century. And in the rankings of the greatest mass murderers, he is generally placed at the head of the list, indicating that he was worse even than Stalin. Estimates of the number of Mao's victims reach as high as 73 million, though the authoritative *Black Book of Communism* figure is 65 million.<sup>18</sup> Body counts on this scale can only boggle the mind; they are perhaps beyond the reach of imagination.

In order to get any kind of mental grip of Mao's crimes, one has to sort them either by period or by type. Some historians and commentators take set periods, such as the campaign against counter-revolutionaries in the 1950s (around 750,000 killed and more than 1 million imprisoned); the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962 (45 million dead); the Cultural Revolution (more than 1 million killed); and so on.

**“Between 1958 and 1962, China descended into hell. Mao Zedong threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up to and overtake Britain in less than 15 years. The experiment ended in the greatest catastrophe the country had ever known, destroying tens of millions of lives”**

Frank Dikötter<sup>19</sup>

The figures given for the Great Leap Forward include those who died from famine. Some argue that these are attributable to natural disaster and should not figure in any indictment. The leading expert on the famine, Frank Dikötter of SOAS, however, points to the role that the Communist Party played



in both causing and exacerbating the famine through coercion and systematic violence, and shows that at least 2.5 million victims were tortured to death or summarily killed in this period.

Another way of comprehending the awful reality of the crimes of the Chinese communists is to attend closely to the mechanics of their murders. According to the Dalai Lama, ‘Tibetans were not only shot, but also were beaten to death, crucified, burned alive, drowned, mutilated, starved, strangled, hanged, boiled alive, buried alive, drawn and quartered, and beheaded by their communist Chinese oppressors.’<sup>20</sup> Or one might look at conditions in the network of more than a thousand prison camps set up under Mao – the equivalent of the Russian Gulag – where millions were worked to death.

In our survey, we also asked respondents to nominate their three worst offenders, the most egregious perpetrators of crimes against humanity (see Table 2). There is no correct answer, but there are plenty of opportunities to err.

Despite Mao’s record as the mass murderer with the longest tally of victims, we can see from Table 1 that only one respondent in five even associates him with crimes against humanity at all, and from Table 2 that a mere 8% place him among the worst three offenders.

Given Mao Zedong’s 70% ‘have not heard of’ score, plain ignorance would seem to be the most likely explanation for this state of affairs. But it may be aggravated by the light-hearted way in which Mao is presented in popular culture.

**“Communism is not love.  
Communism is a hammer which  
we use to crush the enemy”**

Mao Zedong

Mao’s image appears to exercise a peculiar fascination. From Andy Warhol prints to cigarette lighters, T-shirts, yo-yos, clocks, knives and

statuettes – and to the millions of enamelled badges – that face is everywhere.

Some may be tempted to sit back and marvel at capitalism’s infinite capacity for cultural appropriation, or enjoy the sight of the free market getting its own back by so thoroughly commodifying the old communist; but in the end, the merchandise itself is surely too intrinsically distasteful. After all, what would be our reaction if it were a different serial killer whose face was on the paraphernalia? What would we think of someone who sported a Fred West badge or kept a statuette of Levi Bellfield on their mantelpiece? We do not need to concern ourselves with debating moral equivalence between ideologies. The matter is simple. The moral equivalent of one murderer is another murderer.

It may well be that our sample from the post-communism generation will not think like that. Many clearly do not know that Mao was quite such an egregious figure; but it could well be that even if they did know, the knowledge would not greatly trouble them.

### **More than two-thirds of those who have heard of Che Guevara do NOT associate him with crimes against humanity**

Before running the Cuban economy into the ground through his incompetence as minister for industry and president of the national bank, Che Guevara set up Cuba’s system of political prisons and forced labour camps. In 1959, he was placed in charge of the jail at La Cabaña fortress in Havana. In his first six months in post, the playboy revolutionary signed more than 400 death warrants and personally executed a 14-year-old boy. Later Che admitted to killing approximately 2,000 prisoners.

Noel Coward’s remark about the strange potency of cheap music could equally well be applied to the trashy iconography of revolutionary chic. Alberto Korda’s photograph of Che has been reproduced innumerable times on posters, T-shirts and book

**Table 2**

**Q. Which of these would you consider to be responsible for the worst crimes against humanity?  
Please rank the worst three in order, with the worst at the top – Summary Table (Top 3 rank)**

Person	Total	Male	Female
Slobodan Milošević	10%	12%	9%
Adolf Hitler	94%	93%	96%
General Pinochet	7%	8%	6%
Vladimir Putin	21%	20%	23%
Ronald Reagan	4%	3%	4%
George W. Bush	13%	15%	11%
F.W. de Klerk	2%	3%	1%
General de Gaulle	2%	2%	2%
Benjamin Netanyahu	4%	5%	3%
Mengistu Haile Mariam	2%	2%	1%
Tony Blair	7%	7%	7%
Barack Obama	3%	3%	2%
Gerry Adams	2%	2%	3%
Ian Paisley	1%	1%	1%
Che Guevara	2%	2%	2%
Leon Trotsky	2%	2%	2%
Pol Pot	6%	6%	7%
Joseph Stalin	40%	44%	37%
Mao Zedong	8%	10%	6%
Vladimir Lenin	7%	7%	7%
Saddam Hussein	49%	43%	56%
President Assad	13%	12%	15%

jackets. As with everything about Guevara, though, the image is not what it seems at first sight.

Known as the ‘Guerrillero Heróico’ the picture shows Che as a man of action, his eyes fixed in defiance on the far horizon. It appears to have been taken at a moment of significance, perhaps the turning point of some battle. Che is alone; behind him only sky.

If we were able to pull back and reveal the whole of the original scene, what we would discover is a platform crowded with celebrity guests, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who were in Havana to pay court to Fidel Castro. At the time the photograph was taken, he was on his feet delivering one of his seemingly interminable speeches. What Korda captures in the ‘Guerrillero Heróico’ is an embarrassed Che arriving late. This story, involving the triumph of image over substance, and an emptiness at the heart of things, works as a metaphor for the Cuban communist experience.

There is no shortage of witnesses to the cruelty of the communist regime in Cuba, nor to the torture and horrors of the prisons and camps there. Miami is full of Cubans eager to recount how, so like a prison has their island become, countless numbers have risked drowning and have taken to improvised rafts in the hope of reaching freedom.

Yet, their testimony seems to have cut through to only 13% of the post-communism generation in the UK. Nowadays, young people in Britain find themselves introduced to Guevara through films such as Walter Salles’s *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) or Steven Soderbergh’s 2008 biopic *Che*. The latter’s star, Benicio del Toro, said at the film’s French premiere that ‘the things that [Che] fought for in the late 1950s and mid-1960s are still relevant today’, adding ‘he stood up for the forgotten ones’.<sup>21</sup> It will clearly require some time, and considerable effort, to wrest back the Enlightenment values and ideals that were hijacked by communism.

### **More 16–24-year-olds call Ronald Reagan and Silvio Berlusconi dictators than say the same of Ceaușescu**

Our polling sample was provided with a list of names and asked whether or not they considered those people to have been dictators, or whether they had never heard of them.

The list contained names that we thought very likely to be identified as dictators, such as Kim Jong-il, the self-styled Supreme Leader of North Korea. Also included were names whose status is contested – Hugo Chávez, for instance, was frequently called a dictator by his political opponents, but others would disagree. We also slipped in a few names of (we thought) obviously democratically elected leaders of Western states: Charles de Gaulle, Silvio Berlusconi and former US President Ronald Reagan.

The ‘have not heard of’ option was by far and away the most heavily used one for this question. Indeed, only two leaders, Vladimir Putin and Ronald Reagan, were recognized by more than half of the sample (see Table 3).

After Kim Jong-il (71%), Vladimir Putin (52%) is in second place in terms of the proportion of respondents considering him a dictator. Indeed, more respondents marked down the multiply elected Putin as a dictator than his Bolshevik predecessor Vladimir Lenin, who seized power in the Russian Revolution of October 1917.

Least known of the sample were two East European communists of the Cold War period: Yugoslavia’s President Tito and the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Those who remember the unravelling of communist dominance in Eastern Europe during 1989 will probably recall being gripped by the news from Romania through the month of December that year: the mass demonstrations in Timișoara; the dictator’s final speech in Bucharest’s main square, where he audibly lost command of the crowd as he tried to boast about the achievements of his socialist

CAN YOU TELL  
**WHO  
SAID  
WHAT?**

  
**CHE GUEVERA**

or

  
**ADOLF HITLER**

**1.** "Youth must refrain from ungrateful questioning of governmental mandates. Instead, they must dedicate themselves to study, work and military service."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**2.** "These hyenas (Americans) are fit only for extermination."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**3.** "Hatred is the central element of our struggle! Hatred so violent that it propels a human being beyond his natural limitations, making him a violent and cold-blooded killing machine."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**4.** "We reject any peaceful approach. Violence is inevitable. To establish Socialism, rivers of blood must flow."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**5.** "I'd like to confess, Papa, at that moment I discovered that I really like killing."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**6.** "Youth should learn to think and act as a mass. It is criminal to think as individuals!"

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**7.** "The victory of Socialism is well worth millions of atomic victims!"

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**8.** "If the (nuclear) missiles had remained, we would have fired them against the very heart of the U.S., including New York City."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**9.** "Judicial evidence is an archaic bourgeois detail. When in doubt, execute."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**10.** "We must do away with all newspapers. A revolution cannot be accomplished with freedom of the press."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

**11.** "Cuban workers have to start getting used to life under socialism. By no means can they go on strike."

☐ **CHE**    ☐ **HITLER**

\*Source: Humberto Fontova, *Exposing the Real Che Guevara and the Useful Idiots Who Idolize Him*

**Answer Key:** 1. Che 2. Che 3. Che 4. Che 5. Che 6. Che 7. Che 8. Che 9. Che 10. Che 11. Che



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**Table 3**

**Q. For each of the following figures, please indicate whether you would consider them to be dictators or not, or if you have not heard of them**

Person	Is/was a dictator	Is/was not a dictator	Have not heard
Hosni Mubarak	16%	9%	75%
Francisco Franco	17%	9%	73%
Ronald Reagan	9%	56%	35%
Silvio Berlusconi	9%	28%	63%
Nicolae Ceaușescu	8%	9%	83%
Josip Broz Tito	9%	9%	82%
Charles de Gaulle	7%	26%	67%
Fidel Castro	33%	14%	53%
Robert Mugabe	29%	10%	61%
Kim Jong-il	71%	5%	23%
Idi Amin	16%	7%	77%
Vladimir Lenin	32%	18%	50%
Vladimir Putin	52%	26%	22%
Hugo Chávez	14%	15%	71%
Ho Chi Minh	20%	12%	68%

revolution; Securitate snipers firing more or less randomly to create a climate of fear; Ceaușescu and his wife fleeing by helicopter, only to face arrest, trial and hasty execution. Yet the generation coming straight after these events, some born within two years of that final drama, know practically nothing of these things. A startling 83% of respondents to our survey did not even recognize Ceaușescu's name.

### **Some 68% did NOT learn about the Russian Revolution at any stage at school**

The sample was given a list of historical topics and asked which of them they had studied at school.

No particular National Curriculum key stage was specified, and so a positive answer might indicate study at any age from 5 until 18.

The subject most commonly studied was the First World War, with 90% of pupils learning about that while at school. The Holocaust and Slavery shared second place, with 82% apiece. Only two further topics had been studied by more than half of the sample: the Tudors (76%) and the Cold War (51%).

The full results are set out in Table 4.

Revolutions abroad were studied by considerably less than half of respondents, with 39% studying the French Revolution, 33% studying the American Revolution and 32% learning about the Russian Revolution.

**Table 4**

**Q. Which of the following history topics did you study in school? Please indicate for each whether it was something you learned about at school or not**

Topic	Did study	Didn't study
First World War	90%	10%
The Holocaust	82%	18%
The Tudors	76%	24%
Mary Seacole	15%	85%
The Cold War	51%	49%
French Revolution	39%	61%
American Revolution	33%	67%
Russian Revolution	32%	68%
Oliver Cromwell	46%	54%
Peasants' Revolt	24%	76%
Slavery	82%	18%
The <i>Windrush</i>	8%	92%



The fact that rather less than a third of the sample had studied the Russian Revolution perhaps helps explain some figures from earlier tables. For instance, if we isolate the ‘Have not heard of’ scores for the Russian revolutionary figures from Table 1, we find:

**Table 4a**

Name	Have not heard of
Lenin	49%
Trotsky	65%
Stalin	28%

Against this background, our next question was perhaps, in retrospect, a tad ambitious. We asked respondents to categorize several Russian/Soviet figures covering the period from the Russian Revolution to the present day as heroes/villains/neither, or to indicate ‘have not heard of’. The results are set out in Table 5.

It is striking how non-judgemental this generation is determined to be. Only one figure, Stalin (with 56%), is considered to be a villain by more than half of respondents. Even Beria escapes censure, albeit because 85% of those questioned said they had never heard of him.

Unwilling to damn, the immediate post-communist generation is unwilling to confer honours or plaudits either. The Soviet-era dissident, physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov, who was sent into internal exile, was considered a hero by only 3% of the sample; the novelist and Nobel laureate, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was imprisoned in a labour camp in the Gulag and later continued to be persecuted by the KGB, was reckoned a hero by only 4%.

Given that 51% studied the Cold War at school, it is odd that 83% have never heard of Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn. Were dissidents not on the syllabus?

Once again, hindsight suggests that our next question may have been a shade over-ambitious. We asked the sample to make an over-arching judgement about the Russian Revolution. The answers they gave are set out in Table 6.

Again, we see a marked reluctance to condemn. Only 12% of female and 10% of male respondents, producing an overall tally of 11%, are prepared to conclude that the revolution was *A tragic event born out of a murderous ideology that led to totalitarian dictatorship*.

Nor is there much support for accentuating the positive. Only a combined total of 13% viewed the revolution in positive terms.

Of those willing to venture an opinion, most settled for what might be called the ‘benefit of the doubt’ position: *Something well-intentioned [that] then went horribly wrong*.

But the clear winner, with a commanding 54%, was *Don’t know*.

Given that, as we saw in earlier answers, 65% had never heard of Trotsky, and only a whisker over half had heard of Lenin, this was surely the honest truth.

At this stage, for the purposes of contextual development in advance of the next question, let us consider the various significant lacunae we have discovered in our sample’s knowledge of the history of communism during the twentieth century by looking at a synoptic table of ‘Never heard of...’ answers.

What jumps out of this table is that only *three names* on our list were recognized by more than half of respondents: Lenin, Stalin and Kim Jong-il (marked by an asterisk). This last is perhaps, given the competition, a bit of a surprise. Kim Jong-il was alive and in office until 2011, when he was succeeded by Kim Jong-un. The lessons are most likely that (a) once again with this sample, the contemporary (or

**Table 5**

**Q. Below is a list of some figures from Russian history. For each figure, please indicate if you would consider them to be a ‘hero’, a ‘villain’, neither one nor the other, or if you have not heard of them**

Person	Hero	Villain	Neither	Have not heard
Boris Yeltsin	5%	6%	15%	74%
Vladimir Putin	8%	43%	30%	20%
Alexander Litvinenko	8%	4%	18%	70%
Leon Trotsky	9%	14%	17%	60%
Joseph Stalin	5%	56%	11%	29%
Vladimir Lenin	11%	25%	17%	47%
Boris Nemtsov	4%	3%	11%	82%
Lavrenti Beria	2%	4%	8%	85%
Mikhail Gorbachev	10%	5%	14%	71%
Alexander Solzhenitsyn	4%	3%	10%	83%
Tsar Nicholas II	7%	12%	21%	60%
Rasputin	7%	27%	21%	46%
Mikhail Khodorkovski	2%	4%	10%	84%
Garry Kasparov	6%	3%	12%	80%
Yuri Gagarin	15%	5%	10%	70%
Andrei Sakharov	3%	4%	11%	83%



**Table 6**

**Q. Which of the following best reflects your view of the Russian Revolution of 1917? If you have no view on the Russian Revolution, just select ‘Don’t know’**

Statement	Total	Male	Female
A tragic event born out of a murderous ideology that led to totalitarian dictatorship	11%	10%	12%
Something well-intentioned but then went horribly wrong	22%	29%	15%
A largely positive event that gave ordinary people hope of overthrowing oppression	6%	8%	5%
Something that showed it is possible to build a fairer society without capitalism	7%	8%	6%
Don’t know	54%	45%	63%

the recent past) trumps history; and (b) possibly, with a father/son succession and almost identical names, the ‘Never heard of...’ score is reduced.

### **Socialism is an uncontaminated brand**

Now, aware of the limits of our sample’s knowledge, we are in a strong position to consider their answers to the over-arching question – one that was designed to test respondents’ attitudes to various ideologies in their contemporary form and expression (see Table 8).

Socialism emerges from this survey as a very robust ideological brand, with the strongest score of positive feelings and the second-lowest negative score – and the overwhelming majority of

respondents (87%) have heard of it. There is no sign that among 16–24-year-olds socialism suffers any contamination effects from its historical association with communism or the crimes of communism.

We know, however, from other questions in the survey that this cohort is not much aware of many of the crimes of communism, and so making them more aware through educational campaigns might conceivably rub some of the guilt off socialism’s gingerbread.

Crude shaming, though, might not achieve much traction with this cohort, which seems temperamentally loath to make critical judgements – or even positive ones. That tendency is evident once again in Table 8, where in most cases neutral scores outweigh negative scores, and also outweigh

**Table 7**

Category	Name	Never heard of...
Russian Revolution	Vladimir Lenin	49%*
	Joseph Stalin	28%*
	Leon Trotsky	65%
Later Soviet + Cold War	Lavrenti Beria	85%
	Yuri Gagarin	70%
	Andrei Sakharov	83%
	Alexander Solzhenitsyn	83%
	Josip Broz Tito	82%
	Nicolae Ceaușescu	83%
	Mikhail Gorbachev	71%
	Boris Yeltsin	74%
	Mao Zedong	70%
World communism	Ho Chi Minh	68%
	Pol Pot	72%
	Fidel Castro	53%
	Che Guevara	59%
	Mengistu Haile Mariam	86%
	Kim Jong-il	23%*

positive scores in every case, save socialism.

Socialism benefits from the standard political taxonomy, since it has other descriptors – ‘communist’, ‘revolutionary socialist’, ‘Marxist’ – available on the Left to draw the flak. Thus, although communist countries may call themselves socialist (e.g. the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) and although hard-left political parties may use the term freely in both their ideology and their nomenclature (e.g. the Socialist Party (England and Wales) – formerly Militant tendency; the Socialist Workers Party), the term socialism alone and unqualified frequently evokes nothing more left wing than constitutional, parliamentary, mainstream social democracy.

Socialism also escapes association with a number of regimes that are socialist in nature and/or describe themselves as socialist, but are not referred to as such by the media. The Arab Socialist Renaissance Party in both Iraq and Syria has generally been called the Ba’ath Party (*ba’ath* being the Arabic word for ‘renaissance’). Consequently ‘socialism’ as a brand has escaped being implicated in the crimes of Saddam Hussein and President Assad of Syria and his father.

Capitalism, by contrast, is 13 percentage points below its rival socialism in the positives scale. It also has high negatives – higher indeed than its positives. Capitalism clearly isn’t selling itself effectively to this age cohort.

**Table 8**

**Q. For each of the following ideologies, please indicate if you have positive or negative feelings about them, or if you have not heard of them**

<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Strongly/somewhat positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Strongly/somewhat negative</b>	<b>Have not heard</b>
Zionism	7%	19%	18%	56%
Nationalism	29%	30%	24%	17%
Neo-liberalism	13%	25%	14%	48%
Fascism	7%	19%	54%	20%
Socialism	41%	33%	13%	13%
Imperialism	12%	29%	28%	32%
Libertarianism	26%	27%	11%	36%
Anarchism	13%	19%	38%	30%
Capitalism	28%	31%	31%	11%

Neo-liberalism is a term that is almost exclusively used pejoratively in political discourse. Neo-liberals do not call themselves neo-liberals: the label is employed by academics or by the hard Left (perhaps chiefly by people who fit both those categories) and describes those who tend to favour market mechanisms. In this survey, however, positives and negatives are more or less evenly matched, and there is a substantial 25% option for neutral. It seems likely that most or all of neo-liberalism's positives are already included in capitalism's positive tally.

Libertarianism does well as the ideology that attracts the fewest negatives. This might suggest that framing right-wing ideas in libertarian rather than conservative terms, or emphasizing libertarian

themes, could be more successful with this cohort – although it would be something of a stretch to assert that on the evidence of this survey alone.

The surprisingly high neutral scores for both fascism (19%) and imperialism (a whopping 29%) provide further confirmation of what sometimes seems a risible reluctance to criticize. There is a seeming contradiction here, though: we know from wider experience of this cohort that it takes a stern, moralizing line on racism, sexism, homophobia and other issues under the banner of identity-politics. This is the generation of crybullies, no-platformers and safe-space demanders, and so any tendency toward non-judgementalism is not wholly unqualified. There is perhaps a touch of lurking


Puritanism in the surprisingly high negative (38%) for anarchism. Only fascism provokes stronger revulsion.

It is puzzling why nationalism should be so popular – coming second in the positives column and attracting relatively few negatives. It is possible that the term has been interpreted narrowly – in the context of contemporary British experience – and has been given a boost by the strong showing of the Scottish National Party at the general election and the popularity of Nicola Sturgeon.<sup>22</sup>

Zionism turns out to attract rather fewer negative sentiments than one might have expected, given the memplexes that this age cohort has been exposed to: Bush and Blair as war criminals; the Occupy/anti-capitalism boilerplate; narratives of crisis and collapse; the Right supposedly serves only the interests of a tiny elite; all conservatives are selfish, devil-take-the-hindmost types; the Left is idealistic and virtuous... and so forth. Demonization of Israel usually comes bundled in that package, but there is little evidence of that this time.

## Summary

The key findings of this survey are:

- The immediate post-communism generation has very little knowledge of the history of communism or of crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes.
- Less than a third of those polled had been taught about the Russian Revolution at school.
- Although 51% said they had been taught about the Cold War, only a much smaller proportion could recognize the names of key historical figures of the period.
- This generation tends to have positive feelings about socialism as an ideology, but negative or lukewarm feelings about capitalism. 

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# 3

## Should we pay more attention to teacher?

We saw in Chapter 2 that many 16–24-year-olds know next to nothing about the Russian Revolution: less than a third of them had studied the topic at any time in school.

Often when some area of ignorance is detected, the automatic reflex is to demand that it should be put on the National Curriculum. In recent years, schools have come under pressure to teach children about sex and relationships, a basket of world religions, domestic violence, lesbian, gay and transgender issues, bullying and cyberbullying, internet safety, how to avoid a variety of risks – including the dangers of radicalization – and, of course, ‘British values’. These are all very worthy things, and it is important to know about them; but it doesn’t leave a lot of time for Maths, English, Science, History, Geography, Computer Science and so on; let alone Art, Music and Sport.

It seems unlikely, therefore, that schools would be able to dedicate special or extra time within the timetable to improve their students’ knowledge of the Russian Revolution – even in its centenary year – unless the project were coordinated centrally by the Department for Education. (This did happen in relation to the First World War, with the department organizing trips of schoolchildren to visit the battlefields of the Somme, for instance. But such initiatives can take years to set up.)

As matters stand, there is only one subject that is required by law to be taught as part of the History curriculum in maintained secondary schools: the Holocaust. Any attempt to add to that is sure to be seen as tending to deny or detract from the special and unique status of that crime.

However, now that the government has championed the traditional academic subjects that form part of the English Baccalaureate, including the humanities, it is likely that substantially more pupils in England will be studying History than was the case in the years when our survey sample was passing through school.

Citizenship classes, assemblies, school trips and

special days provide other ways in which schools can address important topics, particularly around significant anniversaries.

Insisting on having things taught in school, however, can have unforeseen and unwanted consequences. Are we sure that we would be comfortable for a critical comparison of political ideologies to be left in the sole charge of today’s teachers?

A YouGov poll for the National Union of Teachers in 2013 showed that only 12% of those planning to vote intended to vote Conservative.<sup>23</sup> At the general election 18 months or so later, the Tories attracted 37% of the popular vote. That 25 percentage point gap between where the teaching profession is politically and where the people are is not encouraging.

Theoretically, of course, it should not matter, as the Teachers’ Standards regulations in force forbid personal political biases to be brought into the classroom. But when people believe that they occupy the moral high ground (as left-wingers almost invariably do), then they can all too easily conclude that the regulations are there to curb bad people, not good people like themselves.

Such teachers may fool their own senior leadership teams, and they may even fool Ofsted; but they cannot fool their students. In 2013, sixth former Carola Binney complained about how the Politics syllabus was distorted:

What the exam board Edexcel has to say on the subject of Conservative ideology in its most recent A-level Government and Politics syllabus is downright scandalous. Alongside some recognisable Tory tenets – such as ‘reform is preferable to revolution’ – we were taught that the Conservative viewpoint consists of a ‘fear of diversity’ and support for ‘social and state authoritarianism’. It views people as ‘limited, dependent and security-seeking creatures’ and supports ‘resurgent nationalism ... insularity and

xenophobia'. The equivalent entry on socialism contains such feel-good phrases as 'social stability and cohesion, social justice, happiness and personal development' and doesn't get any darker than a perfunctory mention of 'conflict as a motor of history'. Which one would you pick?

The actual marking schemes, used in real exams and deciding students' real results, are even worse. The 'correct' answer as to why Conservatives might wish to alleviate poverty is out of 'a pragmatic concern ... in the interests of the rich and prosperous'. Authority is valued because it ensures individuals 'know "where they stand" and what is expected of them'.

Not one of the five suggestions given as a potential answer to the question 'Why has the Coalition government tried to reform the benefits system?' mentions improving lives by freeing people from the welfare trap; four are variations on 'cutting costs'. The marking scheme for the question 'The Coalition government's deficit-reduction programme goes too far, too fast. Discuss' provides nine bullet points in support and one against: hardly a discussion. But if teenagers didn't regurgitate this stuff, they wouldn't have got any marks.<sup>24</sup>

The following year, Jago Pearson described his experiences in the classroom studying History:

My time studying History at school ... was dominated by Left-wing thinking. Consciously or subconsciously, the educational elite indoctrinates a generation of young people.

The dominance of the Left is deep-rooted and for all to see, especially when it comes to the teaching of history ...

I had some superb teachers ... but the majority of them were rabidly Left-wing and the subjects they chose for their students matched their own misguided outlook on society ...

At A-level, my history course was heavily based around the ... Russian revolution. My teacher, whom I liked and respected but fundamentally disagreed with on countless areas, was a self-proclaimed anarchist. He openly called for the dismantling of liberal democracy.<sup>25</sup>

The main lesson to take away from our Survation ideologies survey, though, is not so much that schoolchildren are being taught about the Russian Revolution and the Cold War from a left-wing perspective, but that they are barely learning anything at all.

To discover how such an outcome can result even when pupils have been exposed to these subjects for a course leading to a public examination, we need to look at some of the pedagogical approaches utilized these days and the quality of the learning resources commonly employed.

There is a lesson plan on the *Guardian* Teacher Network resource bank for an A-level History revision activity on revolutionary Russia. It is called the 'Russian Tea Party' and its stated aims are:

- To consolidate knowledge of the key figures and their political viewpoints within Russia before, during and immediately after revolution
- To strengthen knowledge and understanding of the different strands within socialism through articulating and interacting with competing ideological positions.<sup>26</sup>

The 55-minute lesson begins with students 'applying fake beards' and continues with them 'moving around the room ... discussing, arguing, forming alliances' and being asked to stand 'in order of radicalism'.

According to the lesson plan's author:

The classroom becomes the scene of [a] party and once the guests arrive, the teacher, as host, is there to encourage discussion and wrangling over political positions ...

The party spans a number of years in order to cover the length of the course; in this case, Tsarism, the revolutions of 1917, Lenin's death and the consequent leadership struggle. This enables different characters to take centre stage at different points, as well as allowing students to recreate the various alliances and political fallouts over time. The role play aspect is designed to help students articulate often quite challenging political ideas ... The teacher's role is kept to a minimum, ensuring the learning remains student-centred and possibly even fun.<sup>27</sup>

Those who find the tea party a too feminized form of revolutionary fun could try a more muscular activity: 'Marxism through Arm-Wrestling', devised for the International Baccalaureate History course and available at the Active History website.<sup>28</sup>

Students act out a roleplay over several rounds which is deliberately designed to illustrate the Marxist conception of how free market economies function. Through arm-wrestling and games of 'split or steal', the bourgeois class quickly emerges. Thereafter, attempts to maximise profits drives down wages, discriminates against smaller traders and generally creates a class of disaffected, exploited proletarians.

The arm-wrestling exercise forms part of the 'Marxism v. Capitalism' unit, which we are told is:

designed not simply to provide an essential ideological introduction to a proper understanding of the 1917 October Revolution

... it [also] helps students to form their own judgements about the respective merits of left- and right-wing ideas about how society and economy should be organised.

Students studying the unit are also shown a video about Karl Marx made by the comedian Mark Steel, who spent nearly 20 years as a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

The History teacher, Russel Tarr, who devised the unit, does acknowledge that 'It is very important that in a study of this kind students are reminded that an understanding of Marxist thought does not necessarily mean agreement with it.' And for a moment it looks as though some corrective tilt is imminent: 'In this exercise students are presented with a series of common criticisms of Marxism and points in defence of the free market.' But in the end even this could be seen to serve a left-wing agenda: 'They are then asked to consider how and if a Marxist could effectively respond to these criticisms.'<sup>29</sup>

One of the online History resources most frequently used by schools is the BBC Bitesize site. Here, in the pages dealing with the Russian Revolution, the corporation's infamous biases and attitude problems find particularly virulent expression.

The page entitled 'Long-term Causes of the Russian Revolution' sets the tone. Why did the Romanov dynasty fall in 1917? Because, says the BBC, 'it was out of date ...'.

How so?

'All the institutions that supported the monarchy – such as the Church, the nobility and the faithful loyalty of the peasants – came from the Middle Ages.'

The BBC will expect readers, especially young readers, to share its assumption that anything dating from the Middle Ages is, in Sellar and Yeatman taxonomy, a 'bad thing'. By contrast, 'new, modern forces were threatening the monarchy



such as the middle class, an industrial working class and Marxism'.<sup>30</sup>

Moving on to 'Life in Lenin's Russia', we learn that 'life improved for many ordinary people'. We are told that the Bolsheviks 'banned religion; brought in an eight-hour day for workers, as well as unemployment pay and pensions; abolished the teaching of History and Latin, while encouraging science; and allowed divorce'.

The communists believed that 'the means of production should be owned equally by the whole community ... not as in capitalism where individuals (who might be very rich) own the means of production and leave the rest of society to be poor and oppressed wage slaves'.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the module, students are presented with a choice between, it is implied, two mutually exclusive possibilities: 'So was Stalin a monster, or a necessary evil for Russia's survival?'<sup>32</sup>

Another online History resource that at times has been even more popular among teachers and students than the BBC's has been the Spartacus Educational site, run by former teacher John Simkin.

The website has attracted criticism from across the world. A newspaper in Finland denounced it as 'Soviet propaganda', and questions were asked in the Finnish parliament, where some legislators mistakenly believed the project to be funded by the European Union. Others have alleged that Simkin's work is 'infused with ... left wing paranoia' and that Spartacus 'delivers agitprop'.<sup>33</sup>

Simkin rebuts such charges, pointing out that he includes a range of interpretations of historical topics on his site. This appears to be broadly true of the pages given over to the Russian Revolution and the Cold War. However, you do not need to spend very long on the site before sensing that you are in a markedly left-of-centre ambience. What's more, Simkin has a blog on the site itself, where he treats readers to his personal political opinions. And that is, of course, his right. He is no longer taking the state's shilling as a classroom teacher, and

has no obligations under the Teachers' Standards regulations to present a balanced account.

Nevertheless, since Spartacus has, over many years, played such a significant part in the education of Britain's children, its trustworthiness is a matter of legitimate public concern.

There is not space here to examine each and every topic in the appropriate sections, but we can perhaps get an idea of Spartacus's reliability from what is included in and (arguably just as crucially) omitted from Simkin's just-so story of how this History resource got its name.

According to its founder, the site is named after the 1960 film *Spartacus*: 'I first saw the movie when I was a teenager and it had a strong impact on my political beliefs. I did not know it at the time, but that was the intention of the scriptwriter, Dalton Trumbo.'<sup>34</sup>

The communist screenwriter, who fell foul of the House Un-American Activities Committee, was jailed for contempt and subsequently blacklisted by Hollywood, gets quite a lengthy write-up in Spartacus, despite the fact that – let's face it – he was merely a bit-part player in the Cold War. And yet nothing is said of Trumbo's willingness to toe the Communist Party line during the period of the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact, when he wrote propaganda designed to keep America out of the Second World War.

Writing in the *New English Review*, Norman Berdichevsky supplies a corrective, which also fills in some other significant gaps in the Spartacus account:

Trumbo wrote a novel *The Remarkable Andrew*, in which the ghost of Andrew Jackson appears in order to warn the United States not to get involved in the war. This was so blatant that even *Time* Magazine sarcastically commented that 'General Jackson's opinions need surprise no one who has observed George Washington



and Abraham Lincoln zealously following the Communist Party Line in recent years.’

To gauge the influence of Trumbo and others in whitewashing Stalin and the Soviet regime, one has to view such films as *North Star* and *Song of Russia* (both 1943) that portray the USSR as a land of workers and peasants living in simplicity but in dignity and abundance and dutifully following the guidelines of the Party. Even worse, *Mission to Moscow* (1943) starring no less a luminary than Walter Huston accepted the charges of the 1930s purge trials against Stalin’s former comrades and ‘explained’ how the USSR had ‘generously’ offered Finland five times more land (barren tundra) in exchange for the important security zone along the Karelian isthmus it had demanded just before launching its invasion in 1939.

Trumbo bragged in *The Daily Worker* that thanks to him and communist influence in Hollywood, the Party had quashed adaptations of Arthur Koestler’s anti-communist works, *Darkness at Noon* and *The Yogi and the Commissar*.<sup>35</sup>

Teacher and education writer Robert Peal (aka Mr Hunter) is clear about what is wrong with History teaching today and who is to blame:

Our history classrooms are hobbled by a radical relativism which states that no one historical account should be given predominance over another. Instead of narrative textbooks, most school history books are now made up of bitty excerpts from primary sources – a photograph here, a heavily doctored diary entry there. It is claimed that through investigating this primary evidence for themselves, pupils are empowered to construct their own version of the past.<sup>36</sup>

He blames an organization established at Leeds University in 1972 called the Schools History Project (SHP), which, Peal says, has done ‘untold damage’ to the teaching of History. ‘The SHP was formed with the belief that history should be used to transmit “attitudes and abilities rather than the memorisation of facts”,’ he explains. ‘Since its formation, the SHP’s philosophy has influenced everything from the national curriculum to teacher training, textbooks and GCSE examinations.’<sup>37</sup>

The director of the Schools History Project between 1997 and 2008 – a period when many members of the NCF’s survey cohort were passing through secondary education – was Chris Culpin. He is a former History teacher, examiner and textbook writer. He helped to draft and revise the History section of the National Curriculum. He also happens to be a Russian history specialist and has written one of the main textbooks on the Russian Revolution for A-level History. Culpin is, inevitably, another man of the Left: anti-Trident, anti-Tory, pro-Corbyn and so on.

‘I’ve been interested in Russia all my life’, he says. ‘For those of us who lived through the Cold War, it was portrayed as the “evil empire”; for those of us interested in political change, it was clearly a possible model.’<sup>38</sup> A possible model? Surely he should know how the story unfolded? After all, he wrote the textbook!

As it happens, Christopher Culpin also co-wrote *The Era of the Second World War* for Collins and *Nazi Germany 1933–45* in the Hodder Enquiring History series. It must be very dispiriting for someone who has gone to all that effort to look upon the educational outcomes in this subject.

In May 2012, Lord Ashcroft conducted a survey to assess the level of knowledge about the Second World War among schoolchildren: 1,007 children aged 11–18 were interviewed. This sample would have been born between 1994 and 2001, and there would therefore have been quite a considerable overlap with the NCF cohort born between

1991 and 1999.

It turns out that it is not just the Russian Revolution, the Cold War and the crimes of communism of which the post-communism generation is ignorant. Lord Ashcroft found that more students (92%) could recognize Churchill the dog in the insurance adverts than Sir Winston Churchill himself (only 62%); 57% of the sample did not know that the Battle of Britain was fought in the air; only 4% could correctly state the year in which the Second World War began.<sup>39</sup>

More worrying still, the report of the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission, published in January 2015, noted that:

... new research from the UCL [University College London] Centre for Holocaust Education shows that the majority of young people do not know some of the most fundamental facts that explain why and how the Holocaust happened, even after studying it at school. Typically, secondary school students have little understanding of: who was responsible beyond Hitler and the Nazis; where the Holocaust took place; the scale of the murder; or even why the Holocaust happened, with all victim groups being explained away by a general 'racism' or 'prejudice'.<sup>40</sup>

Following on from the work of the commission, the House of Commons Education Committee investigated the state of Holocaust education in schools. As part of its inquiry, the committee looked briefly at the teaching of other genocides, and received written evidence from Andy Lawrence, a History teacher from Hampton School.

During 2015, Mr Lawrence surveyed around 800 secondary schoolchildren aged 11–18 from schools across the country to determine the extent of their knowledge of genocides. The overwhelming majority (81%) were unable to name any genocide other than the Holocaust. Alarming, only 5%

were aware of the genocide in Cambodia, compared to 19% in our survey who associated Pol Pot with crimes against humanity. Just under half (49%) were unable to define the term 'genocide' at all.<sup>41</sup>

The research from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education that was cited by the Prime Minister's Commission found that 'the word "antisemitism" was absent from the lexicon of most 11 to 16 year olds, probably due to lack of understanding about the term's meaning'.<sup>42</sup> This was even the case among many of those who had specifically studied the Holocaust in school.

This fact, taken alongside the evidence that the term 'genocide' is so little known, suggests that schoolchildren in Britain are not learning important, domain-specific vocabularies pertinent to the topics they study. The main reason for this is the visceral antipathy among many teachers towards knowledge – particularly among those who would describe themselves as 'progressive' in their pedagogy. Absurd as it may seem, whether one is pro- or anti- a 'knowledge-based curriculum' has become a fault line among teachers, with some tending to equate 'knowledge' with a Gradgrindian attachment to 'facts' and contemptuously associating it with rote learning. More valuable than knowledge, they insist, is the development of 'skills', such as critical thinking, particularly in an age when factual information can be scooped up in a trice from Google or Wikipedia.

However, a new wave of younger teachers with a strong attachment to a pedagogy informed by high-quality research is now reasserting traditionalist teaching methods and recognizing the importance of 'knowledge' that includes facts, but that also encompasses procedural knowledge and domain-specific vocabularies. They cite evidence from neuroscience and psychology to show that a bed-rock of knowledge is an essential precondition for the development of those much-prized skills.

We can expect the resistance to these sensible developments to be fierce and to last for some

years to come. Consequently, high levels of ignorance about important subjects – such as the Holocaust and the crimes of communism – are certain to persist. The problems that our survey has highlighted will not be solved in our schools: at least, not in the short term. 🌱

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# 4

## A disputed history

‘Today is the 90th anniversary of the October Revolution. In an attempt to bury the memory of that revolution, bourgeois writers and commentators have poured mountains of filth over it’, declared the International Marxist Tendency back in 2007. ‘The truth is that the world is pregnant with revolution and the bourgeoisie fears that the lessons of October 1917 can be used by the workers and youth of today to put an end to this rotten system once and for all.’<sup>43</sup>

Nine years seems an improbably long gestation: even elephants move more quickly in their journey to maternity. So we can safely conclude that the world was not really pregnant with revolution back in 2007. It was pregnant, though – with an event whose significance that selfsame Trotskyist groupuscule was perhaps destined inevitably to misread:

The collapse of Lehman Brothers glaringly exposed a voracious model of capitalism forced down the throats of the world as the only way to run a modern economy, at the cost of grotesque inequality, exploitation, wars and colonial occupations; it has now come down crashing. The baleful twins of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism had been tried and tested to destruction.<sup>44</sup>

Crisis? What crisis? A more sober appraisal was supplied by the artist Patrick Brill (aka Bob and Roberta Smith):

Yesterday, at the same time as Lehman Brothers went belly up and Merrill Lynch was bailed out, Damien Hirst made £70m. This tells us that capitalism is not dead. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer – and in the evening, the rich went to an art sale and spent the small change in their pockets. This crisis is kind of like the capitalist cat shifting on its cushion.<sup>45</sup>

You can be sure, however, that the far Left will be ramping up the rhetoric of crisis and collapse once again in the centenary year of the Russian Revolution, as part of its perpetual struggle to be relevant – something the revolution itself manages without effort.

As historian Christopher Read says:

... the Russian revolution and its consequences remains a living topic, attitudes towards it being woven into the fabric of liberal capitalist self-justification and into socialist ideas of all varieties, not least the shrill polemics of radical groups which trace their lineage back to one form of Bolshevism or another. It has very much been a case of ‘tell me what you think of the Russian revolution and I’ll tell you who you are’.<sup>46</sup>

As we shall see, there is little in the detail of the revolution that capitalist and socialist agree upon, but both are united in the view that the Russian Revolution was important, and that it was a key historical event which helped shape the remainder of the twentieth century and which continues to possess strong political and cultural salience long after the fall of Soviet communism.

Disagreements about the subject between historians – academic disagreements that are only sometimes political as well – begin at the beginning; or rather, begin by disputing when the beginning actually was.

There were two revolutions in Russia in 1917: one in February, which lasted less than a week, swept away the monarchy and installed a provisional government; and the second in October, which brought Lenin and the Bolsheviks to power. (These dates relate to the old style – Julian – calendar then in use. According to today’s calendar, the revolutions took place in March and November, but the old-style months are those by

which the revolutions are usually termed.)

Historians, though, can start the story in all sorts of places. Some begin with the revolution of 1905, which Trotsky saw as a prologue; others start in 1894, when Tsar Nicholas II came to the throne of the Russian Empire. Richard Pipes kicks off in 1899.<sup>47</sup>

Orlando Figes starts out in 1891, when ‘the public’s reaction to the famine crisis set it for the first time on a collision course with the autocracy’.<sup>48</sup> Edward Crankshaw’s account of the ‘drift to revolution’ commences in 1825.<sup>49</sup>

Whatever. It is not an iron rule, but the earlier the start of the period under discussion, the more likely it is that you will encounter someone telling you that the revolution was the ‘inevitable’ result of the working-out of impersonal social or economic forces. There are, though, different kinds and intensities of determinism; and in the historiography of the Russian Revolution you can meet all of them: from the hard, Marxist sort, to throwaway references to ‘seeds being sown’ or ‘inexorable’ drives...

Some accounts cite the allegedly terrible impoverishment of the peasantry as a key factor in the revolution; but then up pops a pesky group of scholars who claim to find evidence of rising agricultural output, income and living standards; or who point out that, on the eve of the revolution, no less than 90% of the land was in the hands of the peasantry. But such inconvenient truths are not always attended to.

‘Although this [new evidence] invalidates the very foundations of the existence of an agrarian crisis,’ writes Michaël Confino,

the conventional wisdom of its existence still reigns supreme in historical writing, college textbooks, and university courses. And indeed, if you take out the agrarian crisis from the grand synthesis of ‘The causes of the Russian

Revolution,’ many other pieces fall apart, thus requiring its complete re-examination, which apparently not everybody is prone to do at this stage.<sup>50</sup>

Until 1991, Soviet historians conformed to a party line that required them to praise Lenin and base their analysis on Marxist principles. According to the orthodox version, the Bolshevik victory in 1917 was inevitable – a product of the working-through of the laws of history. These historians point to a continuity of popular radicalism, involving the masses connecting the revolutions of 1905, February and October 1917. Great emphasis is placed on the role of the masses, on the development of a revolutionary class consciousness and on the role of the Bolsheviks as a vanguard party.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this matrix of historical interpretation was abruptly withdrawn within Russia. Nowadays it is used, in subtly nuanced variants, across the gamut of hard-left groups internationally.

Contending with these Marxist accounts is a tradition of liberal scholarship in the West that its soft-left critics see as coloured by the prejudices of the Cold War, and that its hard-left critics absurdly characterize as propaganda dictated by the CIA. It is amazing that when the latter employ their intemperate rhetoric, they do not reflect on how risible a proposition it is that a scholar who is among the world’s leading authorities on his period or subject should have sitting above him a presumably even more brilliant and knowledgeable puppet-master pulling his strings. Robert Conquest’s writings about Stalin have time and again been attacked on the basis that they are Cold War propaganda; but time and again, as new facts have emerged or as archives have been opened, he has been proved right.

Scholars from free societies disagree over many aspects of the story: over which classes made the

running; whether the key thing was economic backwardness or modernization; how significant the war was; whether the tsar fell because he was too autocratic or because he began to loosen autocracy's grip; whether the revolution was driven by impersonal forces or the calculation of identifiable actors.

Sometimes a historian will sweep away years of such debate with a single magisterial paragraph:

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was not an event or even a process, but a sequence of disruptive and violent acts that occurred more or less concurrently but involved actors with differing and in some measure contradictory objectives. It began as a revolt of the most conservative elements in Russian society, disgusted by the Crown's familiarity with Rasputin and the mismanagement of the war effort. From the conservatives the revolt spread to the liberals, who challenged the monarchy from fear that, if it remained in office, revolution would become inevitable. Initially, the assault on the monarchy was undertaken not, as widely believed, from fatigue with the war but from a desire to pursue the war more effectively: not to make revolution but to avert one. In February 1917, when the Petrograd garrison refused to fire on civilian crowds, the generals, in agreement with parliamentary politicians, hoping to prevent the mutiny from spreading to the front, convinced Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate. The abdication, made for the sake of military victory, brought down the whole edifice of Russian statehood.<sup>51</sup>

One area that is sure to prove contentious once again in an anniversary year is the extent to which the masses played a major part in the October Revolution. The question is: was it a popular rising or more like a coup d'état carried out by a small, well-disciplined group? In other words, were the Bolsheviks genuinely the vanguard of a

mass movement, or more like a group of terrorist conspirators who succeeded in identifying and seizing the moment?

Probably the most striking and effective piece of propaganda promoting the popular uprising interpretation has been Sergei Eisenstein's 1928 film, *October*. The film had been commissioned as part of the Russian Revolution's tenth anniversary celebrations. Eisenstein became over-ambitious and had to work on beyond his deadline. In the end, a 'work in progress' version was screened at the official anniversary occasion at the Bolshoi Theatre in November 1927. The full version was released the following year.

The most dramatic scene in the film, the one that presents the revolutionaries in heroic terms, turns out not to be true. There was no 'storming' of the Winter Palace: the full-on assault by a column of Red Guards, soldiers and sailors was invented.

As Robert Rosenstone writes:

So wholly fictional is this large and impressive battle that good jokes were being told about it even during Eisenstein's time. The most common: that more ordnance was detonated during the making of the film than during the original taking of the Palace. The second most common: that there were more deaths and injuries during Eisenstein's re-creation than during the historical events. The former is no doubt true; the latter is probably true.<sup>52</sup>

What is more, according to historian Michael Lynch, there was not much more mass action on the streets of Petrograd during the rest of the revolution either: 'In the three days ... that it took for the city to fall under Bolshevik control there was remarkably little fighting. There were only six deaths during the whole episode and these were all Red Guards, most probably accidentally shot by their own side.'<sup>53</sup>

Orlando Figes has found no evidence of any



large-scale popular participation in the October Revolution either:

The few surviving photographs of the October Days clearly show the small size of the insurgent force. They depict a handful of Red Guards and sailors standing around in half-deserted streets. None of the familiar images of a people's revolution – crowds on the street, barricades and fighting – were in evidence.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, throughout this socialist revolution, Petrograd's taxis operated as usual.

**“The myth of the well-intentioned founders – the good czar Lenin betrayed by his evil heirs – has been laid to rest for good. No one will any longer be able to claim ignorance or uncertainty about the criminal nature of Communism”**

Tony Judt<sup>55</sup>

Another important focus of enquiry – and one that has a direct bearing on how we should remember the revolution in a way that does justice to the victims of communism – is whether communism's homicidal tendency was acquired during a desperate bid for survival during a hotly contested civil war, or whether it was there all along, latent in Bolshevik structures or the ideology of Marxism-Leninism itself.

‘By March 1918, Lenin's Bolshevik regime, then just five months old, had knowingly killed more of its political opponents than Czarist Russia had in the whole preceding century’, Tony Judt reminds us.<sup>56</sup> Or as Orlando Figes concludes: ‘The Red Terror did not come out of the blue. It was implicit in the regime from the start.’<sup>57</sup>

This can be confirmed by looking at the autocratic system of legislation, set up within a fortnight of the

October Revolution; at the subsequent formulation ‘enemies of the people’; or at the Cheka – the secret police and forerunner of the KGB – established right at the start. Or by attending to the blood-curdling rhetoric of the Bolsheviks themselves.

It will be important to revisit these arguments at the time of the centenary, in order to confront the perennial optimism of the Left, which holds that next time, with a warmer-hearted cast of characters, communism might work. As Martin Malia put it, ‘there never was a benign, initial phase of Communism before some mythical “wrong turn” threw it off track. From the start Lenin expected, indeed wanted, civil war to crush all “class enemies”; and this war ... continued with only short pauses until 1953. So much for the fable of “good Lenin/bad Stalin”.’<sup>58</sup>

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# 5

## ‘All Power to the Labour Party!’: Echoes of 1917 in today’s politics

It may not be much of a slogan. It does not have quite the same ring to it as Lenin’s ‘All Power to the Soviets!’. But since the summer of 2015, most of the revolutionary socialist groups in the UK have come to realize that the only way they will ever be in a position to exercise any real political power and to have any real political influence in this country will be by teaming up with the Labour Party.

Such a thing would have seemed impossible at any point since Neil Kinnock’s expulsion of the Militant tendency in the early 1990s. But Jeremy Corbyn’s accession to the leadership has made the entry of the hard Left into mainstream politics not just possible, but inevitable.

Between the 2015 general election and January 2016, the Labour Party doubled its membership. Yet during that same period, some 14,000 existing members, mainly Blairites appalled by Corbyn’s victory and his shadow cabinet appointments, handed back their membership cards in disgust.

Even if the moderates in the parliamentary party pull off some sort of coup and topple the Corbyn leadership, there will be no going back to the centrist ways of New Labour. With the recruitments and the resignations, the party has changed irreversibly, from the bottom up.

Precisely this reality was foreseen by the former Militant tendency, now rebranded as the Socialist Party. In summer 2015, it posted a message of support for Jeremy Corbyn on its website. In wishing him well, it also noted that a Corbyn victory would mean ‘in effect, the formation of a new party’.<sup>59</sup>

They were not the only ones to spot the opportunity presented. Jack Conrad of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Provisional Central Committee) declared: ‘... we unhesitatingly want a thumping Corbyn majority. It would trigger a civil war in the Labour Party and ... shift politics in Britain to the left ... we seek to refound the Labour Party as a

“permanent united front”. In Russia their name was soviets.’<sup>60</sup>

What has been remarkable over the months since Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership has been the way in which a broad and diverse array of Marxist groups and groupuscules, spanning the whole gamut from Stalinists through every rival nuance of Trotskyism, have settled their differences and come together to work for a common outcome. It is impossible to overstate how remarkable this is. Some of these groups have hated one another for decades, and the only place it seemed likely they would bury the hatchet was in each other’s heads.

There had, of course, been previous attempts to pull the hard Left together. One was the new political party Left Unity, set up in response to veteran filmmaker Ken Loach’s 2013 call to unite to oppose austerity.

Left Unity modelled itself on Greece’s Syriza, and initially positioned itself to lead the fight against austerity. It hoped that, like Syriza, it would be swept into office if economic conditions became sufficiently grim. But the party was first frustrated by George Osborne’s effective stewardship, which brought economic growth and rising employment; and it was then thrown off balance by Jeremy Corbyn’s success in Labour’s leadership contest.

What to do? Some members wanted to dissolve Left Unity as a political party, and reconstitute it as a network of activists who were also members of the Labour Party. Others wanted to keep their identity as a party and to work alongside Labour in the new movement, Momentum, that was created by the team that had run Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership campaign. And some simply walked away and returned to Labour.

One of this last group – in fact a founder member of Left Unity – called on others to join him: ‘... the place for all radical socialists is fighting within the



Labour Party to deepen and continue the Corbynist insurgency – not wallying about on the margins of UK politics ... whilst the class struggle happens elsewhere’.<sup>61</sup>

In his 1920 pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*, Lenin himself addressed the question of whether or not British revolutionaries should involve themselves with the Labour Party. He raised the question of ‘whether it is possible to bring about the Soviets’ victory over parliament without getting pro-Soviet politicians *into* parliament, without disintegrating parliamentarianism from *within*, without working within parliament for the success of the Soviets in their forthcoming task of dispersing parliament’. So long as British communists could retain ‘*complete freedom* of agitation, propaganda and political activity’, he thought they should team up with Labour.<sup>62</sup>

Many of the new shock troops of Corbyn’s Labour leadership campaign came not from other political parties, but via social movements such as Stop the War Coalition and People’s Assembly.

According to the Communist Party of Britain’s Andrew Murray (one of the founders of Stop the War and today once again its chair):

Just as Corbyn sprung his first real surprise by getting on the ballot to be Labour leader, the Peoples [sic] Assembly was organising a huge demonstration in London of 250,000 people against Tory economic and social policies. They cheered Corbyn to the echo. At that moment, probably only a fairly small number were members of the Labour Party. But it was a movement that had now found a crack in the wall of ordinary political life, and was preparing to pour through it – which is what happened over the following ten weeks or so.<sup>63</sup>

‘[I]n a political climate being re-defined by Jeremy Corbyn’s campaign, we can build a bigger, more organised and coherent left,’ argued Alex

Snowden of Counterfire, a spinoff group founded by a group of disgruntled SWP members in 2013. ‘We need socialist organisation that isn’t tied to parliamentary politics, with activists focused on mass movement struggles.’<sup>64</sup>

And even the SWP itself, often seen as one of the most cussedly self-obsessed and sectarian groups on the far Left, seems prepared to take a few exploratory steps through that crack in the wall. ‘Revolutionaries have to engage in a persistent effort to work alongside any section of Corbyn’s supporters in Labour in common activity and struggle,’ says Mark L. Thomas. ‘The election of Corbyn to the Labour leadership offers the scope for united front activities between revolutionaries and reformists around concrete initiatives.’<sup>65</sup>

But the SWP’s enthusiasm was somewhat tepid compared to this full-on endorsement in *Workers Power*, the newspaper of the Trotskyist group of the same name:

For a revolutionary socialist, the purpose of a programme is to meet the immediate needs of the mass of the working class, to mobilise a mass movement to resist the ruling class’s attacks on our living standards and our futures, and to link measures addressing the needs of the day with the fight for a revolution that can end capitalism and create a new socialist society ...

For these reasons Workers Power supports key elements of Jeremy Corbyn’s programme. We believe all socialists should join the Labour Party, defend and promote Jeremy’s progressive demands, and work to extend and deepen these policies in a revolutionary socialist direction. We will be working collectively in the Labour Party, hand in hand with others, to advance that cause.<sup>66</sup>

For some, though, the more urgent priority lies in seeing off the right wing of the Labour Party. ‘As the hard right begins its civil war, the left must respond

with a combination of intimidation, constitutional changes and reselection,' declares James Marshall on the Labour Party Marxists website.

Those proven to be in the pay of big business, those sabotaging our election campaigns, those who vote with the Tories on austerity, war, housing benefits, migration or so-called humanitarian interventions, must be hauled up before the [National Executive Committee] ... Ironically, if it happens, David Cameron's proposed reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600, and the expected boundary changes, due to be announced in October 2018, could prove to be a golden opportunity. We should deselect hard-right MPs and democratically select tried and trusted leftwing replacements.<sup>67</sup>

The Marxist activists plan a thoroughgoing democratization of the party in a way that will make decision makers accountable to them. The party conference would become the supreme sovereign body deciding policy. The National Executive Committee would draft the manifesto. Some even want to abolish the leader's job altogether (calling it 'Bonapartist') and to replace it with a collective leadership.

But not everyone is obsessing about these internal party-management details. Indeed most of the activity now centres on building that 'united front' or 'soviet'. The mechanism for bringing together Labour members with hard-left activists from the communist and Trotskyist groups is Momentum. Local groups have formed across the country and on the internet. All of them work to involve the unions and social movements such as People's Assembly. In the longer run, the aim will be to stress extra-parliamentary activity: direct action campaigns, demonstrations and support for strikes.

Tempers are already beginning to fray, though. Jon Lansman, Momentum's founder, is not prepared to welcome those who will pursue just

their own sectarian interests. 'There are extremely good reasons why the SWP and my erstwhile comrades in the Socialist Party should be told to sling their hook when they try and get involved,' he writes on Left Futures. 'A passing acquaintance with them is all it takes to understand that they're fundamentally uninterested in building the wider labour movement, let alone the Labour Party – which is one of *Momentum's* explicit objectives.'<sup>68</sup> (In the event, Momentum subsequently voted to open membership to anybody who is not a member of a party that fielded candidates against Labour.)

The activists' job is made immeasurably easier by the fact that the party leadership is onside. The new-look Labour Party is in many respects the Corbyn–McDonnell Labour Representation Committee writ large. Jeremy Corbyn has known many of the hard-left activists for many years. Corbyn and the Communist Party's Andrew Murray, for instance, played Box and Cox in chairing the Stop the War Coalition. Murray's day job is as chief of staff at the Unite union, one of Labour's biggest donors. Corbyn's shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, once had close links with the Workers Revolutionary Party.

Simon Fletcher, a Corbyn aide, is a veteran of Socialist Action, a highly mysterious Trotskyist group whose members were all afforded pseudonyms.

The *Guardian* journalist Seamus Milne was once associated with the Straight Left faction that operated inside both the Communist Party and Labour. Jack Conrad (who, as we saw above, wants Labour to become a 'soviet') recalled his time as a member of the opposition faction in the Communist Party of Great Britain:

The opposition was pro-Soviet and to one degree or another pro-Stalin. It should be emphasised that for many Stalin served as a totem. An expression of extreme anti-capitalism. Of course, theoretical poverty had to result. Not

that political talent was entirely lacking. Andrew Murray and Seumas [sic] Milne were counted amongst the opposition’s cadre.<sup>69</sup>

So what is the grand plan, if there is one?

For those clustered around the leader, the Syriza dream must surely be what they hope for. It is most unlikely to happen (but then, that’s what they used to say about someone like Jeremy Corbyn winning the leadership).

Those trying to build a mass movement of the working class that involves the unions, Labour, parties to the left of Labour and issue-based social movements may find themselves divided over what they are ultimately aiming for. Some will have in mind a strong movement that represents working people and that would operate within our democratic and parliamentary framework. But others may be casting themselves in a more heroic role, as modern-day Lenins or Trotskys. According to their playbook, the revolutionary socialists would be looking for the right moment to call on a Labour government to ‘break with the bourgeoisie’.

When is that moment? Lenin provides guidance:

The fundamental law of revolution, which has been confirmed by all revolutions and especially by all three Russian revolutions in the twentieth century, is as follows: for a revolution to take place it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realise the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes; for a revolution to take place it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. It is only when the *‘lower classes’ do not want to live in the old way and the ‘upper classes’ cannot carry on in the old way* that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nationwide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters). It follows that, for a revolution to

take place, it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realise that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it; second, that the ruling classes should be going through a governmental crisis, which draws even the most backward masses into politics (symptomatic of any genuine revolution is a rapid, tenfold and even hundredfold increase in the size of the working and oppressed masses – hitherto apathetic – who are capable of waging the political struggle), weakens the government, and makes it possible for the revolutionaries to rapidly overthrow it.<sup>70</sup>

What would that involve? Well, one veteran hard-left activist now advising the Labour leadership is reported to have said back in the 1970s that when the moment came, it would be wise to have a weapon handy: ‘The ruling class must know that they will be killed if they do not allow a takeover by the workers. If we aren’t armed there will be a bloodbath.’<sup>71</sup>

Those who can remember the 1970s may recall the dilemma that level-headed people faced in those days. Who were to be regarded as the more risible: the socialist revolutionaries outside the coal mines and the car factories who seriously believed that they would be seizing power? Or the retired generals, former spooks and assorted club-land buffers who believed the same thing and started making preparations for a military coup?

A touch of that period’s craziness crept back straight after Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership victory, when news that an unnamed general had discussed the possibility of mutiny with the *Sunday Times* led to YouGov polling the public to see how many of us would back an anti-Corbyn coup – not one from inside the shadow cabinet, but one involving tanks on the streets!


While the threat of any actual revolution remains

extremely remote, the presence of revolutionary socialists within the Labour Party and the wider Labour movement poses real and present dangers. We know that at least one of the Trotskyist organizations with members (or former members) active in the Labour Representation Committee, Momentum and the Labour Party itself supplied the personal details and addresses of Jewish people prominent in politics, business and the media to Libyan intelligence officers in exchange for money. The same group also filmed and photographed Iraqi dissident demonstrations and handed the pictures on to representatives of Saddam Hussein's security apparatus.<sup>72</sup>

In March 2016, the prime minister raised with Jeremy Corbyn the case of Gerry Downing, a Labour member and political activist from Brent, whose Trotskyist group was on record as saying 'we recognise US-led world imperialism as the main enemy of humanity and so advocate critical support and tactical military assistance from the working class to all those fighting for the defeat of imperialism'.<sup>73</sup> From the context in which these words appeared, it seems clear that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis) was one of those deemed worthy of 'tactical military assistance'.

Although there is no suggestion that Downing himself has provided any such assistance, the ideological logic of seeing 'US-led imperialism' as the main enemy that must always be engaged is that the Left will have to ally itself with appalling individuals and causes. Whereas once upon a time far-left groups had secret, fellow-travelling arrangements with the Comintern, the Soviet Union or other socialist governments, nowadays they might have similar clandestine arrangements with reactionary Islamists or even terrorist organizations.

The main danger posed by the far-left takeover of the Labour Party is, though, a simple one: greater political and economic disruption. The country will face more and more set-piece demonstrations, and every minor grievance will be inflated in an attempt

to bring about a general strike. Political life will become more confrontational, with an increase in class-war sloganizing and shrill anti-capitalism. But it will not just be the tone that changes. Ideas and attitudes that had been banished to the sidelines will be back in play at Westminster. Politicians will be demanding the nationalization of major industries, more and more regulation and ever higher taxes – and all this will seem normal, natural, and even mainstream. We can expect a coarsening of moral sensibility in the Labour Party, accompanied by a stubborn, brutal refusal to acknowledge the human cost of past attempts at building Utopia. 

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# 6

## Marking the centenary

In 1993, a bipartisan bill was introduced into the US Congress, passed through both houses unanimously and was promptly signed into law by President Bill Clinton. The bill's purpose was to establish a foundation to 'educate the American public about the crimes of communism and honor the memory of more than 100,000,000 victims of communism around the world'.<sup>74</sup>

The organization that resulted from this initiative, the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (VCMF), has over the years had an impressive list of members of its advisory council, including Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa, Elena Bonner and Vladimir Bukovsky.

The foundation has erected a physical memorial in Washington, DC: a bronze replica of the papier-mâché 'Goddess of Democracy', set up by Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The memorial was formally dedicated on the twentieth anniversary of Ronald Reagan's 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall' speech at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

The foundation has also established an internet education portal to give students, teachers and the public access to a huge amount of information on topics such as the Gulag and life in North Korea.

But what the foundation has so far failed to do is to build a museum – though not for want of trying. Under the banner 'Help put communism on the ash heap of history', the foundation makes a powerful fundraising appeal:

Communism is the deadliest ideology of the 20th century. The record of its hurt spans almost 100 years. Dozens of countries suffered under communism. From the Soviet Union's Gulags to the Killing Fields of Cambodia, from China's Great Leap Forward to Ukraine's man-made famine and East Germany's Berlin Wall. Marx and Lenin promised progress. But communism delivered fear and death.

Despite the historic record, most college

professors don't teach their students the reality of communism. But the world must not forget the crimes. Especially while communist regimes still dominate the lives of millions. We must tell the truth.

The International Museum on Communism will be a world-class museum in Washington, D.C. dedicated to memory and learning. The museum will keep archives for scholars and host exhibits for visitors and schoolchildren. By revealing the nature of this tyranny, we can help ensure the triumph of liberty.

The International Museum on Communism will seal the fate of communism forever.<sup>75</sup>

The museum, which remains a work in progress, is one of a number of good ideas to do with commemorating the victims of communism that have proved tricky to bring to full fruition.

In 2006, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted 99 to 42 in favour of Resolution 1481 condemning 'the massive human rights violations committed by totalitarian communist regimes' and expressing 'sympathy, understanding and recognition for the victims of these crimes'.<sup>76</sup> Though overwhelming, the vote fell short of the necessary two-thirds majority, because the communist parties organized a bloc to frustrate it.

One of the moving spirits of the resolution, Lithuania's former head of state Vytautas Landsbergis helped continue the campaign, and two years later the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism was signed in the Wallenstein Palace, the seat of the Czech Senate, at a conference hosted by Václav Havel.

The declaration stated that 'millions of victims of Communism and their families are entitled to enjoy justice, sympathy, understanding and recognition for their sufferings in the same way as the victims of Nazism have been morally and politically



recognized'. It went on to call for 'an all-European understanding ... that many crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity ... in the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal'.<sup>77</sup>

The declaration was addressed to 'all peoples of Europe, all European political institutions including national governments, parliaments, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and other relevant international bodies'.

It also made a series of requests and suggestions. One was for the 'adjustment and overhaul' of all European History textbooks, so that children would be properly taught about the crimes of communism.<sup>78</sup> Another was for a European day of remembrance, along the lines of Holocaust Memorial Day, and the establishment of an Institute of European Memory and Conscience. The declaration had been preceded by the European Public Hearing on Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes, organized by the EU.

The proposal for a European day of remembrance was quickly adopted: in 2009, the European Parliament instituted the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism (later also adopted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)).

The European People's Party grouping within the European Parliament introduced the proposal thus:

... 2009 is a deeply symbolic year, since we celebrate both the 60th anniversary of the creation of NATO and the beginnings of the cold war, and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which ended it. This is why we have proposed to launch a Europe-wide day of remembrance which will help Europe reconcile its totalitarian legacy, both from the Nazis and the Communists.<sup>79</sup>

The day is observed on 23 August and is known as Black Ribbon Day. In some ways this works. Black

Ribbon Day was originally a popular 'bottom-up' initiative in Western countries during the 1980s. The 23 August was chosen because that is the day on which the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact (the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) was signed in 1939, and is therefore appropriate for a day that honours the victims of both Nazism and communism. In 1989, Black Ribbon Day formed the catalyst for the massive demonstrations which involved 2 million people forming a human chain in the Baltic states to protest against Soviet occupation.

However, 23 August is useless: in England (and indeed much of Europe) the schools are closed, and so there is no possibility of marking the day in assemblies. Most people are on holiday. For the media, at the height of the 'silly season', commemorating Europe's victims of totalitarianism is too solemn a proposition, even on one of the slowest news days of the year. Consequently, few people in Britain have even heard of Black Ribbon Day.

In 2010, East European political leaders made a further call for action on the part of what they saw as Europe's sluggish institutions. With the Chinese dissident Harry Wu as the guest of honour, they held a three-day conference in Prague, culminating in the Declaration on the Crimes of Communism. This reiterated previous calls for a Nuremberg-style court to bring perpetrators to justice, and introduced some controversial measures – such as a demand for a pan-European law against 'excusing, denying or trivializing the crimes of communism', in line with the statutes in force in some states that criminalize Holocaust denial.<sup>80</sup>

The declaration had some positive effects: for instance, the Platform of European Memory and Conscience was established in 2011. It brings together NGOs from 18 countries 'to increase public awareness about European history and the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes and to encourage a broad, European-wide discussion about the causes and consequences of totalitarian rule'.<sup>81</sup>

But then came the inevitable backlash.

On 20 January 2012, the seventieth anniversary of the 1942 Wannsee Conference, the Seventy Years Declaration was presented to the president of the European Parliament. It was signed by a number of members of the European and national parliaments, and among the UK signatories were Luciana Berger MP, John Mann MP, Denis MacShane MP and Lord Janner:

On this the 70th anniversary of the formal adoption by the Nazi leadership of the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Problem' we the undersigned ...

**Reject:** Attempts to obfuscate the Holocaust by diminishing its uniqueness and deeming it to be equal, similar or equivalent to Communism as suggested by the 2008 Prague Declaration. Equating Nazi and Soviet crimes as this blurs the uniqueness of each and threatens to undermine the important historical lessons drawn from each of these distinct experiences. Attempts to have European history school books rewritten to reflect the notion of 'Double Genocide' ('equality' or 'sameness' of Nazi and Soviet crimes) ... Efforts to have the Holocaust remembered on one common day with the victims of Communism.<sup>82</sup>

In retrospect, the mistake was obvious. Yoking the crimes of communism alongside the Holocaust inevitably led some to interpret the move as relativizing the Holocaust, denying the uniqueness of that crime, lessening it or detracting from it in some way.

Less obvious, perhaps, was the fact that the campaign for proper recognition of communist crimes would, in some intellectual and academic circles, reawaken an old controversy. In the 1980s, Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas clashed over the relationship between Nazism and communism. Nolte had maintained that Nazism was essentially a reaction to communism, and that the two

totalitarianisms were much the same, differing chiefly in who played the victim role – Jews or 'class enemies'. While such debates seem to have tremendous importance in intellectual cultures, which insist on discussing every question on some oxygen-starved plane of abstraction, in our more grounded Anglo-Saxon tradition they are seen as not really worth the detour.

'Was communism as bad as nazism?' asks Timothy Garton Ash.

French and German intellectuals have been thrashing this out for years. The best answer was given by the arch-chronicler of Soviet terror, Robert Conquest, who said simply that to him the Holocaust feels worse. Rationally, it may be difficult to spell out exactly why it's worse to set about exterminating a whole race rather than a whole class, but the Holocaust does feel worse.<sup>83</sup>

Does that mean we should accept without challenge what Ferdinand Mount has called the 'asymmetry of indulgence'<sup>84</sup> that characterizes our society's treatment of Nazism and communism? Is a murder committed by a socialist morally any less foul than one committed by a national socialist?

Some would argue that yes, a crime committed by a racist, motivated by racism and in pursuit of a racist end is more discreditable than one committed in some scenario of tragic expediency, where the original motivation was noble and idealistic.

We should approach the 'good intentions' justification with scepticism. Once again, this is something that should be dealt with pragmatically. One might, for instance, understand and forgive a Cambridge undergraduate in the 1930s joining the Communist Party, particularly if he has witnessed Jarrow marchers passing through town. But if he is still in the Party, or spying for the enemy 20 years later and cynically sending innocents to their deaths, then really this talk of 'idealism' and 'good intentions' will no longer wash.



What is more, we should keep in mind the legal notion of ‘constructive notice’: there are things we just have to expect one another to know – things any reasonable person would know. We have all been on notice of the toxicity of communism for generations now. The somewhat suspect and often studied naivety that our opponents on the Left call ‘good intentions’, we can call culpable ignorance of the facts of life.

A socialist will rather too readily slip into the saddle of a moral high horse, and part of the project of right-thinking people must surely be to tip him out of it. It is important to point out that whited sepulchres are really charnel houses. We need not accept that the Left’s ‘ideals’ are always admirable – particularly the wrong sorts of equality. (What could be more unfair than treating people who are very different as if they were the same?)

Then there is the hopeful optimism, which genuinely expects that next time around communism will be different. Next time it will be without a Stalin. Next time – without a Pol Pot. These terrible men were the product of specific times and contingencies, so the argument goes, and it could all work if we behave well. But the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski dismissed the possibility of a democratic communism as ‘contradictory as a fried snowball’.

From a tactical point of view, it is probably as well to avoid making comparisons with the Holocaust or Nazism at all. That was what prevented Martin Amis from getting his point across fully in his book *Koba the Dread*. The Left likes nothing better than to side-track any discussion of communist crimes into a sterile debate about moral equivalence. The issue has become a proxy for denial.

Besides, there are plenty of other murderers in history available for comparison. Widening the frame of reference might make for more impactful metaphors. When we see Jeremy Corbyn going about in his Lenin hat, we should not ask the trite question: What would the world say if he dressed up in Nazi regalia? Instead, we could ask: Isn’t this just

as distasteful as going about dressed to look like Levi Bellfield or Harold Shipman? A repeated insistence that the moral equivalent of one murderer is another murderer (*any* other murderer) is probably more powerful than always referring back to the Nazis.

The key aim, as the centennial approaches, must be to prevent the occasion becoming a celebration of communism. To make it so will be the natural instinct of the left-liberal establishment. (Even to mention the victims will be seen as wanting to rain on the parade.) An example of what we have in store is the Socialism Goes Global project, funded to the tune of £818,000 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The project is about:

... the transmission, circulation and reception of values, cultures, and beliefs between what western contemporaries called the ‘Second’ and ‘Third Worlds’. Following the Second World War, the countries of eastern Europe radically recast their global role by re-imagining their relationships with Africa, Latin America and south-east Asia. They developed new forms of global knowledge and new institutions to support a wide-ranging program of socialist ‘export’: theatre and film, economic and scientific expertise, humanitarian aid and political ideals – all were essential to eastern Europe’s grand effort to translate ‘socialist modernity’ globally. The project also reshaped the ‘socialist metropole’, as post-colonial cultures were imported into eastern Europe through, for example, mass media, political solidarity movements, and the presence of ‘Third World’ students, workers and exiles.

So far, so much blether. Cutting to the chase:

As part of the centenary of the Russian Revolution in autumn 2017, we will organise a

‘film festival’ with the British Film Institute (BFI) on the subject of ‘Global Socialism’. We will use a range of films from the 1920s to the 1980s, some of which will have been analysed as part of our academic research project, to explore the way in which socialist filmmakers in both the ‘Second World’ and other world regions represented their political and cultural projects for a world audience, sought to promote their revolutions abroad ...

And it gets worse:

In our contemporary moment, when aspects of neo-liberal globalisation are being questioned and rethought, historicising globalisation’s growth in the postwar period, for a popular audience, has much potentially to add to a broader public conversation. For this reason, we aim to write a series of programmes for BBC Radio 4 on the topic of ‘Red Globalisation’. This will explore attempts both by socialist states and international organisations to create an alternative socialist form of globalisation, and their ultimate failure in the face of a neo-liberal model. It will be written in a popular format that uses appealing accounts from our research – such as the role of eastern European experts in the modernisation of Iraq or Libya; the Cold War competition between e.g. Radio Moscow and the BBC in Africa and Asia; or the role of football in taking eastern bloc culture to Latin America – in order to tell this story in a compelling and appealing manner. The BBC have expressed a strong interest in scheduling this series to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and the BFI festival. It would be additionally broadcast via i-player and other media: these can potentially reach a broad international audience.<sup>85</sup>

In short, the plan is to mark the occasion of the centennial of the Russian Revolution by bringing together academics, the BFI, the BBC and other like-minded parties to hold an upbeat international jamboree of socialism, whose catchphrase might as well be: Don’t Mention the Stasi. And we are paying. It is not merely the vulgarity of the project that offends, but its moral incongruity.

The way in which the centennial will be discussed in Britain as it occurs will depend in large measure on how the anniversary is marked elsewhere. We know now that anti-capitalist groups across Europe plan to make the centenary a focus of disruptive demonstrations and occupations.

The group Blockupy, which, in March 2015, organized protests outside the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, where activists clashed with riot police, has already invited its network to save the date:

There is a rumor that a European Conference will take place in Rome where the political elite will debate and constitute new treaties to deepen EU governance and economic integration. The streets of Berlin could also be the center of our rebellion in 2017. It is the capital of German-Europe, of austerity doctrine, the symbol of authoritarian rule over Greece and the heart of Fortress Europe. At the same time it is home to strong social struggles from below. May 1st, the historically unique day of the left, has been raised before as a date. In autumn 2017 the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution coincides with the German federal elections. Let’s disturb their election spectacle all together as transnational movements from below. In a wild referendum on the feet we hold our own election: for an anti-capitalist Europe without borders.<sup>86</sup>

The revolutionary potential of the global Occupy movement was explored in an essay, ‘Lenin and

Occupy' by a sympathetic commentator, Pham Binh:

Leon Trotsky's description of the party as 'a lever for enhancing the activity of the advanced workingmen' captures exactly how Occupy has functioned. In the space of four weeks, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) mobilized more workers and oppressed people than the entire U.S. socialist left combined has in four decades. OWS did not begin with a program or a series of demands but with an action that inspired tens of thousands of others to act, speak, march, occupy, and rise up in an elemental awakening (or *stikhiinyi* in Russian).<sup>87</sup>

Another concern: how will Vladimir Putin mark the occasion? The early signs are not encouraging. An article appeared last year on the pro-Putin propaganda website Sputnik, using rhetoric from the Soviet era:

Since the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, Western media has made every effort to downplay the achievements of the Soviets, creating a picture of complete horror and despair which had allegedly engulfed the USSR.

The bold historical experiment kicked off by Communists and based on the concept of a 'fair distribution of national wealth,' egalitarianism and internationalism, made the blood of Western plutocrats run cold ...

If the new system proved effective it would have changed the world forever. Needless to say, it did not comply with the plans of the Western financial and political elite.<sup>88</sup>

The article went on to allege that the 'Holodomor' – the Ukrainian word for the Terror-Famine, a deliberately contrived famine that resulted in the death by starvation of millions of peasants in 1932–33 – never happened, and was a Western hoax. This intervention is clearly related to Russia's

current antagonism towards Ukraine, but it may be indicative of a wider propensity to deny crimes of the Stalinist period.

Both these potential developments – anti-capitalist rioting around Europe and further tensions between Russia and the West – might help to raise the profile of the centennial.


Given that the UK will still be commemorating the First World War in 2017 and that the Russian Revolution is not obviously a UK national concern, one can expect little in the way of engagement from the UK government.

But there are steps that the government should take:

- Move the observance of Black Ribbon Day in the UK for 2017 to 7 or 8 November, in order to make a formal and institutional acknowledgement of the connection between the revolution and the subsequent crimes of communism.
- Establish a formal link between the UK government (the Cabinet Office) and the Platform of European Memory and Conscience and the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, with a view to hosting events at 10 Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament, at which surviving victims of communism can share their testimony.
- Open discussions between the Department for Education and the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, with a view to facilitating the use in English schools of VCMF educational materials (along with corresponding facilitation for other devolved administrations, as appropriate).

There are also steps that civil society organizations should take:

- At one of our major cathedrals, organize a multi-faith religious service of commemoration of the victims of communism during the week of the centennial.
- Organize a letter from leading historians to the director-general of the BBC and the senior editors of other media organizations, putting the case for appropriate forms of coverage of the centennial and warning against potential hijack.
- Launch a public appeal during the year for funds to establish a permanent memorial to the victims of communism within the UK, and announce an open competition to design it.
- Coordinate a series of bespoke specialist talks and events – on economics, foreign affairs, philosophy and ideology, arts and culture – to be hosted by the broad conservative and libertarian movement during the week of the centenary in November 2017.

In this way, we can at least ensure that the multiple tragedies that arose from the events of October 1917 are remembered with fitting sobriety and dignity. By way of counterpoint, we can confidently expect the Left to supply their farce. 

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