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When evil triumphed: The 100th anniversary of Russia's October Revolution

The centenary of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 should be an occasion for understanding Marxism's amoral and pseudo-religious nature.

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Monument to Lenin in St. Petersburg ([deno/us.fotolia.com](#)); Soviet flag ([dimbar76/us.fotolia.com](#)).

One hundred years ago on October 25 (Old Style Calendar), a Marxist political movement led by an intellectual political activist named Vladimir Lenin mounted a successful coup d'état against Russia's ailing Provisional Government. Most believed the Bolsheviks would themselves be overthrown quickly. Scarcely anyone recognized that it marked the beginning of one of the world's most diabolical regimes, one which lasted until the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

The implications of what came to be known as the October Revolution weren't really grasped at the time. That's partly because, as the historian Richard Pipes wrote in his epic *[The Russian Revolution](#)* (1990), "the West considered Russia to lie on the periphery of the civilized world," one which was "in the midst of a World War of unprecedented destructiveness." Yet it didn't take long for Russia's new Communist masters to show just how far they would go to maintain and extend their rule as they sought to realize the Marxist dream.

A cult of amorality

The toppling of Russia's Provisional Government by Lenin and the Bolsheviks turned out to be an exercise in pushing down a house of cards. Contrary to later Communist myths, the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg was never stormed. After token resistance, it was overrun by mobs of looters. Moscow was a different matter. Fierce house-to-house fighting lasted until November 2.

In his account of the Bolshevik coup, Pipes points out that most of the population paid little attention to what was happening. This owed something to Lenin and his colleague, Leon Trotsky, successfully portraying the Bolshevik coup as a takeover by the Soviets of workers and soldiers: organizations which had functioned as a type of parallel government in the months leading up to the coup.

That was hardly the first lie propagated by the Bolsheviks. From the beginning, Communism has held, and Marxists have believed, that the ends always justifies the means. By this, they mean they don't recognize any moral constraints whatsoever when it comes to seizing and using power to realize their goals.

Lenin himself exemplified this. The effects of Lenin's willingness to lie, sanction mass theft, and authorize the execution of those deemed a threat to the Bolshevik Revolution only differed from Stalin in terms of scale. Like Stalin, Lenin was, to use Pipes' expression, "A stranger to moral qualms."

But from where did this essential amorality arise? Lenin himself was no sadist. He wasn't the type of functionary which you find in all totalitarian systems: those who take pleasure in torturing or killing people or supervising such goings-on. Lenin was, Pipes maintains, simply apathetic about the suffering of others; his unconcern with their pain reflected his Communist beliefs.

This is one reason why I've always regarded claims that "Juanita is a sincere Communist, but she's a good person" to be as naïve, ignorant, and dangerous as suggesting that "Hans is a sincere Nazi, but he's a nice chap." For to be a Communist is to embrace views of humanity just as reprehensible as those of a convinced Nazi. The phrase "Marxist humanism" (which you still hear today in the faculty-lounges of Western Europe and California or on parts of the political left) is as self-contradictory as "Nazi humanism."

Sympathetic and hostile biographers of Lenin agree that his embrace of Marxism involved whole-hearted acceptance of Marxism's combination of philosophical materialism and a deterministic view of history. This mixture of ideas leads to clear and disturbing conclusions.

First, the true philosophical materialist doesn't think there's anything special about human beings. Expressions like "dignity," "rights," "responsibilities," etc., are empty constructs in a materialist's world. Instead people are just "material." Thus like any other material object, they can be shaped—and disposed of—as others will. And the only way to determine who gets to do the molding and terminating in this world is whoever possesses the power to do so and who is least squeamish about using it. The parallel here between the implications of Communism's philosophical materialism and Nazism's nihilistic glorification of the Nietzschean will to power is clear.

So where does the Marxist view of history fit into this? Orthodox Communist thinking holds that history is driven by changes in the means of production and its ownership. At some point, we will arrive at the end of history: the Communist utopia which will emerge after the proletariat inevitably achieves dominance and abolishes private property, money, class-differentials, and the state (and, yes, there *is* an anarchist dimension to Communism).

The misery experienced by people as part of this process is precisely that: merely part of a process. Humans are just material through which history works.

This is why Lenin was unmoved, for example, by the suffering of peasants affected by a famine which broke out in the 1890s in the Volga region where his family lived. Lenin opposed helping starving peasants because he thought such assistance would impede their movement to the city in search of

food and work. *Anything* that speeded up their absorption into the urban proletariat which would be the engine of inevitable revolution was to be welcomed—even a famine. All Lenin added to this was the conviction that a vanguard led by people like himself could accelerate the inevitable if the right set of conditions emerged.

It's in this sense that subsequent developments under Communist regimes—Lenin's Red Terror; Stalin's purges and gulags; the millions slaughtered during Mao's Cultural Revolution; the genocide engineered by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; Castro's concentration camps and the firing squads presided over by the Argentine-born contemporary leftist-icon Che Guevara, etc.,—were not aberrations. They flowed logically from Communism's integration of philosophical materialism, its view of history, and Lenin's conviction that the party could hasten the inevitable. Lenin was only more at ease with this trajectory than some Marxists were, and are, willing to admit themselves to be.

A pseudo-religion

In its rejection of morality and its willingness to do evil—lots and lots of evil—to achieve desired goals, Marxism's criminal and terroristic character is laid bare. Lenin himself would have been familiar with Karl Marx's own lack of inhibitions in this area. As Marx wrote in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in May 1849, "When our turn comes, we shall not make excuses for the terror."

Yet for all its essential materialism, the Marxism espoused by Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders who took over Russia was always more than that. It also amounted to a type of religion: indeed, a deeply intolerant faith which brooked no dissent.

This insight is well-explained in Benedict XVI's second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*. This was published in November 2007, almost 90 years to the day that the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. The timing, I suspect, was not coincidental.

As the encyclical's title suggests, it focuses on the meaning of Christian hope. At one level, this involves distinguishing the Christian understanding of hope from the way it is understood by others.

According to Benedict, Marx effectively took the ultimate horizon of hope offered by the prospect of eternal life with God, and turned it into a very this-worldly salvation theory of history, politics, and economics. Marx then applied himself, in Benedict's words, "to the task of launching this major new and, as he thought, definitive step in history towards salvation." There is, Benedict writes, a straight line between the development of this secular religion and October 1917. "Real revolution followed," observed the pope, "in the most radical way in Russia."

To this, we can add other areas in which Marxism apes Christianity. Communist regimes had sacred books such as *Das Capital*, and prophets like Marx and Engels. They possessed their own ecclesial organization (the Communist Party) with its own hierarchical clergy (party-members, the Central Committee, the Politburo, the General Secretary), theologians (Marxist theoreticians), saints (Che), and its own doctrines from which party-members could not stray without compromising their orthodoxy. Communist systems even had their own version of the end-times: the New Jerusalem of Communism. The more you look, the more obvious the parallels with Christianity.

But there were, Benedict comments, two fatal flaws in all this. The first was that Marx's vagueness about how to transition from what was supposed to be an intermediate state—the dictatorship of the proletariat—to Communism. "Lenin," Benedict states, "must have realized that the writings of the master gave no indication as to how to proceed" (SS 21). That opened the door to the intermediate becoming permanent: i.e., systematic and lasting terrorism and criminality.

More fundamentally, Benedict states that Marxism's Achilles heel turned out to be its core beliefs. For if you are a true philosophical materialist, you cannot believe in free will or free choice. Why? Because these are distinctly *non-material* features of human beings. You can't touch free will. Yet we know that it exists whenever we make a free choice for one thing rather than another.

Hence, thanks to his philosophical materialism, Marx—and all his followers, past and present—lost sight of something. "He forgot," Benedict wrote, "man and he forgot man's freedom." Hence, Marx also "forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil" (SS 21).

Benedict's point is that the possibility of error and human sinfulness is part of the price-tag that goes along with the liberty to choose between good and evil. This not only means that there are no heavens-on-earth. It also means that striving to create the earthly utopia promised by Marxism and its fellow travelers always leads to destruction.

Terror, terror, and more terror

Death and devastation didn't take long to follow Lenin's seizure of power in 1917. The Bolsheviks were not the originators of state terrorism. But the depth and extent of the terror implemented by Lenin and his followers far exceeded that of France's Jacobin dictatorship, which murdered thousands of "enemies of the Revolution" between 1793 and 1794.

The Red Terror wasn't solely a result of the Civil War which engulfed Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. Terrorism was a matter of state policy for the Bolsheviks. As Trotsky (himself an advocate of mass terror who proclaimed that "our enemies will face not prison but the guillotine") later related, Lenin opposed and successfully reversed the death penalty's abolition. His reasoning was simple: "How can you make a revolution without executions?"

The same cold-bloodedness was on full display during a Cabinet meeting in February 1918. During a discussion about how to deal with "counterrevolutionaries," Lenin turned to Isaac Steinberg, the non-Bolshevik Social Revolutionary Commissar for Justice, and asked: "Do you really believe that we can be victorious without the cruelest revolutionary terror?"

As the debate continued, Steinberg's anger about Lenin's proposals to replace due process of law with "revolutionary conscience" grew. Eventually Steinberg exploded and exclaimed, "Then why do we bother with a Commissariat of Justice? Let's call it frankly the *Commissariat for Social Extermination* and be done with it!" Lenin's response was telling: "Well put . . . that's exactly how it should be . . . but we can't say that."

Herein we come face-to-face with the true nature of the evil of Marxism which was unleashed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Communism authorizes and even celebrates the suspension and suppression of moral norms that absolutely prohibit certain actions like lying—or theft or killing or being envious. It's one thing to be, for instance, dishonest but acknowledge you are doing evil. It's altogether different to say that no such moral absolutes exist: that morality is in effect a fiction, a mere set of customs to be dispensed with, whenever convenient.

A century ago, people who believed such things took over an empire which was on its knees. That event marked the beginning of choices that, according to the ***Black Book of Communism*** (1997), resulted in the deaths of anywhere between 85 and 100 million people in the 20th century. The amorality that led to such oceans of blood, and the real character of the Marxism from which this amorality flowed, are what we should be remembering on this centennial of the October Revolution.

Sometimes, it turns out, evil does win.

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