

Soviet Union Rewind: Why Are We Praising Communism Again?

by Paul Kengor

COMMENTARY: In 2020, the United States, the longtime home of free markets, watches millions of its citizens embrace socialism and even communism, the scourge of the 20th century.

Thirty years ago this month, something critical happened in Moscow signaling the end not only of the Cold War, but of the Soviet Union itself. On Feb. 7, 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded in banishing the Communist Party's guarantee as the USSR's sole political party. He backed a proposal by free-market reformers to repudiate Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which had ensured the more-than-70-year communist stranglehold on power. The communist monopoly was officially ended.

This historic shift was greeted by a top-of-the-fold headline across *The New York Times*. I still remember where I was when I saw that headline. I was walking down Fifth Avenue of the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, en route to my job at Children's Hospital and Presbyterian University Hospital, where I was a pre-med student working for the organ-transplant team. The headline hit me like a Soviet SS-20 missile and was a key factor redirecting my path ahead, eventually taking me toward a different field of study, one in which I would go on to spend the next three decades of my life explaining why the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed and, equally important, why no rational human being should ever choose the destructive road of communism and socialism. As evidence of the political system's history of human-rights violations, conservative estimates of the death toll under communist/socialist regimes in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, Cuba and elsewhere number in the tens of millions.

And yet, all along, I've watched in dismay as an entire generation of young people raised in our public schools and universities not only haven't learned the crucial lessons about communism and socialism but, quite the contrary, have been taught that these ideologies really weren't all that bad. Socialism and communism, they're told, merely had not been done properly.

I've thus spoken to countless groups on college campuses and elsewhere giving talks with titles like, "Why Communism Is Bad" and "Communism, Socialism and 'Democratic Socialism': What the Heck Is the Difference." This is information they flatly do not know. I've sounded that warning for years now, with many colleagues rolling their eyes thinking I'm being a tad hysterical. Sure, I could give anecdote after anecdote, but these were just anecdotes. Right?

Well, now we have more than anecdotes. We have hard data, and that data is only getting worse. In the early 2010s, I noticed a clear break during the Obama presidency. I began to see a flip in surveys asking young people if they preferred socialism. A 2014 survey by the Reason Foundation found that 53% of 18- to 29-year-olds viewed socialism favorably. In 2015, the same year that "socialism" was the most looked-up word at Merriam-Webster, Gallup found 69% of millennials saying they would vote for a "socialist" president.

Many people shrugged that off. And yet, in the 2016 Democratic primary, millions did precisely that, voting for Bernie Sanders, a lifetime avowed socialist. Sanders got 13 million votes in the Democratic primary — 40% of votes that year, and almost as many as Donald Trump received (14 million) in the Republican primary.

In 2020, Bernie is the front-runner for the Democratic Party. That should not surprise us, given a 2019 survey that found that, among registered Democrats, 57% view socialism positively. High as these numbers are, they continue to increase. A November 2019 survey by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (conducted by YouGov) found 70% of millennials saying that they are likely to vote for a socialist.

And it isn't merely young people. In May 2019, Gallup found that four in 10 Americans generally prefer socialism, with 43% saying socialism would be a "good thing" for America. Even more disturbing, praise for communism is on the rise. That November 2019 survey by Victims of Communism and YouGov shows that 36% of millennials say they approve of communism, and 22% believe "society would be better if all private property was abolished."

Their ignorance of the crimes of communism is likewise shocking. Amazingly, an October 2016 survey by the Victims of Communism found that one in three millennials and one in four Americans generally believe President George W. Bush killed more people than Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Yes, you read that right. Few statistics are so revealing of a profoundly sick ignorance.

Alas, likewise disturbing, especially for readers here, is that some Catholics are not immune to this growing enchantment. Last summer, in July 2019, America magazine published a piece by one of its staff correspondents, Dean Dettloff, titled, "The Catholic Case for Communism," along with a defense by the editor in chief, Jesuit Father Matt Malone, "Why we published an essay sympathetic to communism." The piece is posted online with a photo of the "Communist Crucifix" handed to Pope Francis by Bolivia's Marxist President Evo Morales.

This is grossly ill-informed and irresponsible on many fronts, particularly given how the Catholic Church has consistently confronted communism and socialism for literally more than 170 years, unlike any other institution. In 1846, two years before the Communist Manifesto was even published, Pope Pius IX issued his encyclical *Qui Pluribus*, which stated that communism is "absolutely contrary to the natural law itself" and would "utterly destroy the rights, property and possessions of all men, and even society itself." In 1849, Pius IX issued *Nostis Et Nobiscum*, which described both socialism and communism as "wicked theories," "perverted theories" and "pernicious fictions."

Such condemnations continued on from papacy to papacy. In 1878, Pope Leo XIII's *Quod Apostolici Muneris* criticized communism as "the fatal plague which insinuates itself into the very marrow of human society only to bring about its ruin." Pope Pius XI's May 1937 encyclical, *Divini Redemptoris* (Atheistic Communism), referred to communism as a "satanic scourge," a "collectivistic terrorism ... replete with hate." Marxists were "the powers of darkness." "The evil we must combat is at its origin primarily an evil of the spiritual order," said the encyclical. "From this polluted source the monstrous emanations of the communistic system flow with satanic logic."

And as for socialism, Pope Pius XI in May 1931 issued *Quadragesimo Anno*, which affirmed, "Religious socialism, Christian socialism, are contradictory terms; no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist." Read that again: **One cannot be a good Catholic and a socialist.**

As for oddball Christians who confusingly want to be socialists, Pius XI advised a better course:

If they truly wish to be heralds of the Gospel, let them above all strive to show to socialists that socialist claims, so far as they are just, are far more strongly supported by the principles of Christian faith and much more effectively promoted through the power of Christian charity.

If they want to help the poor, they should be Christians, not socialists.

In July 1949, Pope Pius XII issued his "Papal Decree *Against Communism*," which asserted that it was not licit for Catholics to join or show favor to communist parties, nor "to publish, distribute, or read publications that support Communist doctrine or activity, or to write for them." The decree even stated that "Christians who profess, defend or promote materialistic Communist doctrine incur the penalty of excommunication as apostates from the Christian faith." Think about that. That means that, quite literally, America magazine's piece last summer could have been cause for excommunication in 1949.

Pope Francis has also condemned communism. In December 2013, he said, "The Marxist ideology is wrong," though adding: "But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people." Francis knows how deadly communism has been. In April 2017, Francis decried "the many Christians killed by the demented ideologies of the last century." In June 2019 in Romania, he beatified seven communist-era martyred bishops who had "endured suffering and gave their lives to oppose an illiberal ideological system that oppressed the fundamental rights of the human person."

To be sure, Francis is a product of a 1970s Argentinian mindset that's skeptical of free markets and favorable toward aspects of collectivism and wealth redistribution. But still, he has condemned Marxism as "wrong," as has his Church. Francis knows, as any Catholic should, that Catholics can't support communism or socialism.

As St. Pope John XXIII put it, “No Catholic could subscribe even to moderate Socialism.” He rightly insisted: “Socialism ... takes no account of any objective other than that of material well-being. ... It places too severe a restraint on human liberty.”

And yet, here we are in the United States in 2020, and young people are praising communism, voting for socialists, and Catholic publications are publishing articles making a “Catholic Case for Communism.” This is a highly disturbing trend, prompting many of us to wonder if we really did defeat these ideologies when we won the Cold War. We defeated socialism and communism in the war room but not in the classroom.

And so, take a look back and assess where we are today: In 1990, the USSR, the longtime home of socialism and communism, rebuked socialism and communism. In 2020, the United States, the longtime home of free markets, watches million of its citizens embrace socialism and even communism. Pretty sad.

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His books include A Pope and a President and The Divine Plan and The Politically Incorrect Guide to Communism.

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