

Anti-Christian, Anti-Human: Early Communism in Russia

Most Americans oppose communism as a failed and evil system, but their understanding of its mechanisms remains incomplete. When assessing the shortcomings of the Soviet Union, a conservative would be quick to point out the failures of central economic planning; a liberal might criticize the USSR's militarism; and both would likely condemn its widescale human rights violations. But communism did not immediately initiate its slaughter of an estimated 100 million people, or create a system that erases the individual, taking away his or her rights, property, and freedom. To leave the individual defenseless, communist systems first stripped away society's connection to three larger structures that keep its citizens grounded: homeland, religion, and culture.

The Soviet Union could never have been described as the nation of the Russian people, even if the geographical entity known as Russia made up most of its territory. It is understandable that Americans often conflate "Russians" with communism: During the Cold War, politicians and the media used the terms interchangeably. Even much of today's mainstream anti-Russian sentiment rides the inertia of Cold War strategic thinking. But there was a Russia before communism – a mighty, imperfect, tragically beautiful nation – and there is a Russia now, whose people still struggle to move out of the shadow of its past.

Communist theory states that to overthrow the oppressors, one must foment a revolution by the workers – and in the case of the Russian empire with its large agricultural sector, by the peasants, as well. There were both workers and peasants, as well as enlisted soldiers worn out by years of war, among those who rose up against the monarchy in 1917. But their organizers and agitators had little connection to the Russian people. The socialist intellectuals in St. Petersburg and

other urban centers shunned tradition and dismissed the Russian Orthodox Church. Other Bolshevik leaders, including Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Lazar Kaganovich, and others came from the fringes of the empire and resented Russian rule. Partly out of pragmatism and partly as payback, they promoted national self-determination among the many peoples of the recently disbanded empire – everyone except for Russians. In a 1926 diary entry, Soviet historian Lydia Ginsburg [described the policy thus](#):

We now allow all national sentiments, except towards the greater Russian nation ... Within the Union, Ukraine and Georgia are identified as Ukraine and Georgia, but the word Russia is not censor-approved. One must always refer to it as the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic]. This may not be logical, but it makes historical sense: great-Russian nationalism is too closely tied to counter-revolutionary ideology.

“Great Russian” (*velikoruskiy*) is the traditional term for the people of the Russian heartland. Together with Ukrainians and Belorussians (or White Russians), they form the historical Russian nation from Moscow, to Minsk, to Kiev. The extent to which they should be united has been disputed for centuries, but there is no doubt that all three are eastern Slavic peoples with one religion, similar languages, and common ancestry. Still, according to the Bolshevik ideological framework, the bourgeois Russians had oppressed Ukrainians and Belorussians, along with everybody else. As punishment, they would be reduced to the status of generic Soviet citizens, living in the unimaginatively named RSFSR.

But promoting ethnic separatism would not be enough to erase the imperial past. For nearly a thousand years, Russia had been a devout Christian nation. Orthodoxy was the dominant religion in the Russian Empire, and Moscow alone had [more than 900 churches](#). The communists showed no mercy in eradicating

Christianity. Churches were demolished or repurposed, and the faith was driven underground. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior, built to honor Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812, was reduced to rubble with explosives – an act on par with destroying the National Cathedral and the Statue of Liberty simultaneously. Kaganovich, who would later supervise the crackdown on Ukrainian peasants, [said at the time](#) that “Mother Russia is cast down. We have ripped away her skirts.” The Marxist teaching on religion was clear, and so the communists assaulted and defiled the faith of the Russian people.

Initially, the crackdowns on religion and culture were less brutal in Ukraine – partly due to the early Soviet policy of national self-determination, and partly because the Bolsheviks were occupied with taking control of Russia proper. But when the land-owning peasant farmers in Ukraine and western Russia known as *kulaks* began resisting collective farming, the communist regime targeted them, too. After all, anyone who held onto the old ways and refused to give up the land that his ancestors had nurtured for centuries counted as a class enemy.

Soviet authorities imposed impossibly high production quotas on all non-compliant peasants, not just the *kulaks*. They confiscated grain, livestock, and other food sources, causing millions of deaths in [the Holodomor](#). Thousands more were arrested, deported, or executed for concealing their property from the authorities.

This extermination by hunger was an unspeakable crime against the Ukrainian people. Soviet leadership made it clear that they intended to exterminate the independent peasantry entirely. Stalin [spoke of](#) “eliminating the *kulaks* as a class” while insisting that they should not be permitted to join collective farms, leaving prison and death as the only options. Kaganovich, who by then was First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine, [remarked that](#) “we’re not shooting enough of them.” This went far beyond bad agricultural policy:

It was a [punitive measure](#) against a demographic that had refused to give up its property and self-sufficiency.

The Soviet Union, especially in its early decades, nearly erased the Russian people's identity. No one has [made this point](#) more forcefully than dissident [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#):

You must understand, the leading Bolsheviks who took over Russia were not Russians. They hated Russians. They hated Christians. Driven by ethnic hatred they tortured and slaughtered millions of Russians without a shred of human remorse. It cannot be overstated. Bolshevism committed the greatest human slaughter of all time.

Statements like these have made some liberal critics of communism uncomfortable with Solzhenitsyn. Is he simply saying that Bolshevik leaders did not value Russian culture, or is he pointing out that a disproportionate number of them were of Georgian, Jewish, Armenian, or other descent? Both are true, but zeroing in on the latter is misleading. Yes, many of the early communists were outsiders, as is often the case in a coup. (Recall that Hitler was Austrian and Napoleon was Corsican.) But they could not have succeeded without thousands of Russian government officials and military officers forgetting their loyalties, whether out of desperation or opportunism, and accepting the Bolshevik takeover. They would soon learn what most citizens of such regimes eventually learn: Communism, no matter who is in charge, does not serve the interests of ordinary people. It wears them down and crushes them. The Russians absorbed this lesson for over 70 years, as their civilizational potential was suppressed and every last bit of their strength was extracted to fuel the communist machine.

Communism presented itself as a liberator and governed as a despot. It always does; it always will. Anyone seeking to assess communism must begin by reckoning with its decimation

of lives in Russia and Eastern Europe. Marxism is not merely economically retrograde and politically oppressive; it is anti-Christian, anti-human, and destructive of every nation where it gains a foothold.

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