

Western Leftists Loved Stalinism and Maoism, Despite Their Horrors

I recently had the opportunity to travel to the Texas Tech University School of Law to debate the merits of capitalism versus [socialism](#) with Ben Burgis, a columnist for *Jacobin* and philosophy instructor at Georgia State University Perimeter College.

It was a riveting discussion, and I hope students left with not just a better understanding of the horrors of socialism but with the inherent morality of capitalism, a system that relies on voluntary action instead of force and state coercion.

There are many issues on which Ben and I disagreed, including his claim that Venezuela was not actually a socialist country, despite the widespread nationalization of private industries. I intend to address this claim down the road, but for now I'd like to focus on Ben's implication that Stalinism and Maoism were not truly socialist models either.

Ben stated he regretted that so much of the debate involved discussions around the USSR, since he wasn't advocating socialism along these lines. Since respectable socialists and progressives don't defend these systems today, why talk about them?

I understand why Ben wouldn't wish to discuss systems that starved and executed tens of millions of people, and I said as much during the debate. But it's important to understand what socialists and progressives of the time—who unlike Ben didn't have the advantage of hindsight—thought of them. And the truth is, they *loved* them.

'An Inexpressible Look of Kindness'

In his *forthcoming book [*In Defence of Capitalism*](#), Dr. Rainer Zitelmann chronicles in painstaking detail how much Western elites were enamored with Lenin and Stalinism, praising the oppressive and violent system in hagiographic language. Here are just a few examples.

"The reality of the 'Soviet Republic' is for my consciousness one of the greatest and most gratifying facts. Because here, for the first time in 2,000 years, a very honest attempt is being made to bring justice into the world through energy. If I die tomorrow, the thought of this isolated phenomenon in the midst of a timid and backward world will be the last, the only consolation."

– German writer and theater critic Alfred Kerr (1933)

"Future historians may well regard the Russian struggle for collectivization as a heroic period in human progress ... The backward section of the population would have the chance to obtain what it most needed, namely education ... women would have the chance for leisure and freedom as well ... whether villages preferred their dirt and ignorance to Progress or not, Progress would be thrust upon them."

– Walter Duranty, *The New York Times*' Moscow correspondent

"Here are happy workers, because they are whole men and women ... Dream, thought, love collaborate in the tedious business of making electric parts, since these toilers are not working for a boss."

– Waldo Frank, American historian and literary critic

"[In Lenin's Tomb] is the only person in the world who is not asleep ... he is the paternal brother who is really watching

over everyone. Although you do not know him, he knows you and is thinking of you."

– French writer Henri Barbusse

It's not just that the Soviet system these individuals were praising was not a utopia; that could be forgiven. What's stunning is that these hagiographic comments were used to describe a murderous system that ruled by terror and [starved millions of people](#).

Many would think the horrors of Stalinism would have turned even staunch Marxists away from socialism. That is not the case, however. In his magnum opus *Modern Times*, the late Paul Johnson showed just how enamored Western intellectuals were with Maoism scarcely a generation after the horrors of Stalinism.

French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir testified that "life in China [under Mao] is exceptionally pleasant." David Rockefeller lauded "the sense of national harmony" under Mao, arguing that his revolution had succeeded "not only in producing more efficient and dedicated administration, but also in fostering high morale and community of purpose."

Johnson pointed out that intellectuals were aware of the horrors of Stalinism, but had convinced themselves that socialism had finally succeeded in large part because of "the extraordinary genius of Mao."

"‘He was,’ Jan Myrdal wrote, ‘third in line with Marx and Lenin, and had solved the problem of how ‘the revolution can be prevented from degenerating.’ He ‘combined,’ wrote an American political scientist, ‘qualities which rarely coexist in one being in such intensity.’ Han Suyin argued that, unlike Stalin, Mao is extremely patient, and believes in debate and re-education,’ and had ‘an ever-present concern with the practical application of democracy.’ ... Felix Greene

believed that the hunger for power had been eliminated and that there was 'no evidence of that jockeying for power or of the personal rivalry that we have seen so often in the Kremlin. Mao was not merely a soldier, a leader, a poet, philosopher, teacher, thinker and charismatic: he was also a kind of saint.'

If you think Johnson is exaggerating that many saw Mao as a saint, consider this quote from the famous Christian communist Hewlett Johnson.

“[I saw in Mao] something no picture has ever caught, an inexpressible look of kindness and sympathy, an obvious preoccupation with the needs of others ... these formed the deep content of his thoughts,” he wrote.

This kind, saintly figure was history's [greatest mass murderer](#), accounting for the deaths of no fewer than 45 million people from 1958 to 1962, and likely as many as 65 million.

'A Century of Failure'

This is just a sampling of quotes from intellectuals praising the socialist systems under Stalin and Mao. You can find many more examples in Kristian Niemietz's 2019 book *Socialism*.

Again, I understand why Ben Burgis, like most socialists, would prefer to ignore this bloody history.

But the notion that “real” Marxists would not support the socialism of Mao, Stalin, Lenin, or Pol Pot—who, as I pointed out in our debate, literally studied Marxism and Stalinism as a student in Paris in the 1950s and founded a Marxist-Leninist student organization (“Marxist Circle”)—is belied by the historical record.

It's easy, of course, to reject these systems in hindsight.

But it doesn't change the fact that every single political system based on the ideas of Karl Marx over the last century has failed, as Niemietz notes.

“Over the past hundred years, there have been more than two dozen attempts to build a socialist society. It has been tried in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Albania, Poland, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, Hungary, China, East Germany, Cuba, Tanzania, Benin, Laos, Algeria, South Yemen, Somalia, the Congo, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua and Venezuela, among others. All of these attempts have ended in varying degrees of failure. How can an idea, which has failed so many times, in so many different variants and so many radically different settings, still be so popular?”

The future of socialism depends on distancing itself from these failures, which is precisely why socialists wish to bury them in the past.

How so many socialists are able to overlook the terror and mass murder of these systems is another, larger story. But as I've previously written, it takes an impressive amount of [cognitive dissonance](#).

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