

OPINION

Relevant for: History & Culture | Topic: Communism

We know that Communism has led to some of the worst crimes against humanity. Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong were monsters, killing millions of their own countrymen. But they were not aberrations. Few know that the world's first Communist revolution, in Russia, which began exactly 101 years ago, was not a just a few momentous days that shook the world but a years-long bloodbath. Millions would die—through mass murder, civil war, repression and famine, before the Communist Party established full control in all its brutal glory.

Communism reached its hideous depths in Russia under Stalin, but it was rotten right from day one. On 6-7 November 1917, an armed band of Bolshevik workers, soldiers and sailors stormed the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, headquarters of a teetering Russian government. On 8 November, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin rose before the newly formed All-Russian Congress of Soviets to take charge.

The Bolsheviks initially promised to respect the will of a constituent assembly, to be elected through universal franchise. But when they lost the elections, they shut down the legislature after it had functioned for only one day, and grabbed power. One party after another was outlawed, non-Bolshevik newspapers closed, and all overt opposition suppressed by a new secret police, the Cheka, which was given unlimited authority to arrest and shoot “counter-revolutionaries”. Everything was nationalised. The state (that is, the Party) became the sole owner of the country's productive and income-yielding assets.

Money was effectively destroyed by the unrestrained printing of currency, which led to extraordinary inflation: by January 1923, prices, compared to 1913, had increased 100 million times. An entire population was pauperized.

How do you feed the cities and the army, when peasants were refusing to sell their produce for rapidly depreciating money for which there was nothing to buy? Lenin sent in the army to appropriate food. Untold thousands of peasants were killed.

The “Red Terror” began in September 1918. Lenin ordered the Cheka to carry out mass executions of suspected opponents. He also instituted the practice of taking hostages from among officials of the old regime and well-to-do citizenry: they were to be executed whenever the state's interests required it. An estimated 140,000 people perished.

In the meantime, Russia was fighting a war on its borders against the White Russian Army, backed by Britain. The Red Army won the war, but the victory hides some ghastly facts. The rate of desertions in the Red Army was unusually high. Machine-gun detachments were often placed behind the troops to shoot retreating units. Estimates of the casualties of the civil war, most of them civilian victims of epidemics and hunger, range from 10 million to three times as high.

In 1920, industrial production was about one-quarter of what it had been in 1913, and the number of employed workers had fallen by roughly one-half. Productivity per worker was one-quarter of the 1913 level. Compelled to surrender all the grain that officials decided they did not require, peasants kept reducing their sown acreage. This led to a steady drop in grain production. In 1920, the cereal harvest yielded only two-thirds of the 1913 crop. In early 1921 came a massive famine. The hungry resorted to eating grass and, occasionally, to cannibalism. The human casualties are estimated at 5.1 million. By this time, the entire countryside was in rebellion: hundreds of thousands of peasants fought the Red Army and were killed.

In 1922, Lenin replaced the Cheka with the GPU, with even greater powers. In addition to wide discretionary authority to deal with political opponents and run concentration camps, it was charged with penetrating all economic institutions to forestall “sabotage”. Hundreds of thousands of people “disappeared”.

Meanwhile, Stalin had been working his way up the Party ladder, buying off members with the promise of increased rations in times of great scarcity. Aware of intra-party squabbling, Lenin tried to interfere, but failed. From December 1922 onward, he lived under virtual house arrest. On his death in January 1924, Lenin was embalmed and put on permanent display in a mausoleum in Red Square, to provide superstitious peasants with a visible symbol of sainthood. The revolution was over, but the horrors had only just begun.

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