

Moscow Hangover

Soviet Communism no longer enslaves Russia, but the West has yet to exorcise Lenin's ghost.

By Peter Hitchens

WHAT A PITY it is that there will be no new Cold War. How useful it would be for the cause of freedom if we could once again hang the Kremlin and the Gulag round the radical Left's neck. But we cannot. The Kremlin is now swept clean of dogma, the Gulag is gone, and Russia is just another sordid despotism.

And so, freed from embarrassing associations with Lenin, Stalin, five-year plans, purges, famines, and the KGB, the world's radical reformers are far stronger, and far harder to resist, than they used to be. As long as the words "progressive," "Communist," and "Socialist" brought to mind images of Soviet oppression, Soviet shortages, and Soviet intolerance, millions of people were inoculated against them.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn used to complain that the Iron Curtain kept everything out of Russia except what he called the "liquid manure" of Western trash culture, which somehow seeped beneath the barriers. In a strange and subtle way, it also prevented the spread of revolution in the advanced world.

It is an interesting lesson in real power to see how much mightier left-wing ideas and movements have become since they lost the support of all those Russian tanks. Far from helping the revolutionary cause, the columns of T-72s showed to the dimmest observer that socialism is not a gentle, kindly thing but an arrogant, ironclad, goose-stepping bully, which answers doubts with bayonets as soon as it has the

power to do so. There was never any need to ask how many divisions the Communist Party had because it was so anxious to show them to us.

I watched the last proper Soviet tank parade as it thundered across Red Square on Nov. 7, 1990. There were red flags, rigid salutes, slanted faces, jackboots, and lush, totalitarian music. Just behind me and to my right, a shifty and diffident Politburo huddled on top of Lenin's tomb in the harsh wind. The thing they were uncertainly celebrating was called the Glorious October Socialist Revolution, that colossal failure that would have killed idealism off for good if we ever actually learned anything from history.

They were not enjoying themselves much because they knew just how bad everything was and suspected their days were almost over. I was enjoying it immensely because, in those days, I harbored the vain idea that the world might learn something useful from the unmitigated disaster of the Soviet Utopia. For thousands of miles in every direction, undeniable and no longer denied, lay the rusting, leaking, sagging evidence that this revolution had failed and that international socialism was a discredited, bankrupt idea.

A couple of months later, I saw some of the same tanks snarling down a midnight highway in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, which was then battling to regain independence from Moscow. I was in a group of journalists following

them, until they swung their barrels toward our taxi in a way that seemed to lack a sense of humor. Earlier that day, Soviet soldiers had opened fire on civilians, so we thought it wise to drop back. We caught up with them later and also with the corpses they had caused, officially classified as "traffic accidents." They were part of a little known and failed attempt by Mikhail Gorbachev to seize control of the city while the world was distracted by the first phase of the recapture of Kuwait.

I saw the tanks for the last time in August 1991, when a squadron of them trundled up my Moscow street in the early morning sunshine, part of a fumbled KGB putsch against Gorbachev. The drunken collapse of this coup ended the Soviet Communist Party forever. All over Moscow, the trashcans were full of half-burned Communist Party membership cards. This was not a temporary setback but the death of an ideology. Soviet Communism had made a fool of itself and had gone. After that, of course, there could be no more Red Square parades, no more anniversaries of Glorious October, though they had one more excursion, in 1993, shelling the Russian parliament on behalf of Boris Yeltsin.

Oddly, the Communist Party, or rather its bewildered true believers, survived. No normal person continued to belong, but these rather touching, rather serious old people—far from contemptible, often incorruptible and serious, fre-

quently decorated veterans of war—could not abandon the faith they had been brought up with. For one brief moment, when millions had their savings wiped out and were thrown out of their jobs, they seemed about to recover. But it passed, and now they linger as a sort of echo, useful to the regime as a harmless, impotent opposition.

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Then it was announced that the tanks were coming back. As part of the inauguration of President Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian army would once again be allowed to drive its armor through Red Square. Had the clock really been turned back 18 years? There had been—and still is—much chatter of a return to the old hostilities.

Russia has certainly discovered that it can use its energy power to threaten its neighbors and buy Western politicians. It snarls, with good reason, over the West's strange anti-Serb policy in Kosovo. It intervenes blatantly in the politics of Ukraine. It menaces former Soviet republics, now nervously independent, on the Baltic coast and in the Caucasus.

And Vladimir Putin, now prime minister, has effectively suffocated political and press freedom, suppressing serious dissent in parliament, banning unwelcome independent candidates from running for office, and creating a creepy mass youth movement and a creepier personality cult.

The mysterious murder of independent journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the still stranger murder of former KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko, and the rigged trial and imprisonment of the businessman Mikhail Khodorkhovsky are seen by most people as signs of the ferocious intolerance of the new regime, which officially

maintains that Khodorkovsky's trial was fair and denies any connection with the two deaths.

There is a temptation to conclude that we have returned to the days of the Evil Empire. Have we? And if so, whose fault is it? My own view, formed in Moscow during the final months of Gorbachev, is that the U.S. and its allies missed a great

opportunity in Russia. We continued to be absurdly suspicious, and needlessly triumphalist, as Gorbachev dismantled his country. We forced Russia back to the humiliating borders imposed on her by Kaiser Wilhelm II at the Carthaginian Peace of Brest-Litovsk in 1917. We brought the NATO alliance up to Russia's front door. We meddled in the Caucasus and Central Asia. But we had neither the military power nor the long-term commitment to these places to sustain these actions. Russia, sadly for the people of Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic Republics, will still be there waiting, long after Washington has lost interest in their fate.

And while we engaged in this maddening hubris, we throged Moscow with experts on the free market and the outward forms of democracy but none on liberty or the rule of law. Many Russians to this day sneer at the very idea of democracy, associating it with the Yeltsin years of suppurating corruption combined with bankruptcy, when their savings were wiped out and their wages and pensions went unpaid, while oligarchs prospered. Instead of saying "*demokratiya*," the normal Russian word for "democracy," they say, with a twist of the mouth, "*dermokratiya*," which translates politely as "the rule of excrement." It is hard to blame them.

When Britain scuttled from her African colonies nearly half a century ago, she, too, was obsessed with the appearance of democracy and left behind toy parliaments, complete with opposition benches and maces. These—lacking the centuries of experience, civil war, and weary, cunning compromise that lie beneath the original—soon became laughable parodies or were simply extinguished. Interestingly, the courts Britain bequeathed lasted far longer. The idea of an independent judiciary, and of a law that is above power, appeals to something universal in the human soul. But that was never even attempted in Russia, though it would have been possible immediately after the fall of Communism.

Partly thanks to us, partly thanks to the horrible moral consequences of totalitarian socialism and the near extermination of God by systematic commissars, the new Russia is a lawless snake pit. It is dominated and populated by men stripped of morality by more than 70 years of cynical Leninism. But though the new rulers are the products of Marxism, they lack its driving purpose—or any real purpose except the gaining and keeping of wealth and power.

So Moscow, once the sacred heart of world Communism, has become a sort of Babylon, the most exhilarating, tasteless, and expensive city in the world, where you can procure anything for money and the nasty negative charisma of gangsters and spivs is on constant display. I cannot think of any other advanced capital in which you can see, side by side, all the manifestations of modern civilization and the symptoms of anarchy—ostentatious bodyguards, fenced-off compounds.

As a former resident from 18 years ago, I view the transformed city with seriously mixed feelings. It is thrilling to see the restored beauty of the churches and monasteries, sparkling with gold

leaf and carefully tended, when all too recently they were semi-ruins, deliberately desecrated as reformatories for teenage louts or tatty warehouses for unwanted junk. It is a delight to stroll in the 19th-century lanes just south of the river, painted and cherished for the first time in 90 years, revealing a gracious and light-hearted Russian streetscape that was previously only visible in old prints and faded photographs.

The cleanliness of the air, compared with the brownish substance that we used to have to breathe, is another joy. Windows are washed, sidewalks are free of sudden chasms and open manholes, rats no longer sport around the entrances to the railway stations. The ambulances are no longer encrusted with dried blood, and the police, though still menacing, manage to be a little less slovenly. Even the great gloomy Stalinist skyscrapers, scrubbed and floodlit by night, seem to have turned into truthful historical monuments of the era that conceived them.

On a fresh May morning, surrounded by all these pleasures, it is hard to remember that a squalid and repressive state is in charge, that corruption is commonplace, and that one chilly pygmy—in spirit as well as in actual size—has just been succeeded by another as president. In fact President Medvedev is even smaller than the 5'5" Vladimir Putin. An unkind rumor says that during his inauguration he never donned his chain of office for fear that it would dangle absurdly around his knees.

It was even a pleasure to watch the tanks growling through the one narrow entrance to Red Square that they can now use. In 1990, they had two ways in, but thanks to the restoration of one of Russia's holiest places, the northern one is closed. In 1929, the shrine of the Iberian Virgin had been torn down, its holy and revered icon flung into a storehouse. Now it is back, and the military

must go another way. There is a special pleasure in this for those who know about the long, violent state persecution of faith begun by Lenin and continuing well into the 1980s. It is over.

Along with the tanks came great bulbous strategic rockets, unpleasant things to see at any time, and marching young men dressed nostalgically in the uniforms of Stalin's Red Army, a conscious attempt to resurrect national feeling among the war generation. For the previous week, Russian TV had been showing classic war films of the Stalin era, many of them much loved, for the same purpose.

I asked several Russians what they thought of this strange parade. One granddaughter of a Red Army general said that her mother, an old-fashioned patriot, was impressed, and I have no doubt that many older, less informed people were. But others were not. An old friend whose father was a submarine captain in Admiral Gorchkov's blue-water navy and who spent his youth close to Soviet military equipment, laughed, "I hope you enjoyed our display of strategic scrap metal."

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He was not far off. The tanks and rockets on display were, at best, prototypes of machines that the Russian arms industry cannot produce in any numbers. The old system has broken down and cannot be replaced. The soldiers are part of a shabby army, as corrupt as the state it serves, that is not remotely comparable, in fighting skills or technology, to a serious Western force.

Attempts to create a professional force have so far stalled. The draft is breaking down as young men bribe their way out of service or sign up for dubious academic

courses, many of them created solely to qualify students for exemption.

The display was intended to promote a picture of a modern, united Russia. But the country is still backward and disorganized, kept going only by the windfall from the high price of oil and gas. The road system is still rudimentary. Agriculture is in ruins—60 to 70 percent of food is imported—and the country manufactures nothing but weapons, vodka, and tourist knick-knacks.

There is the standard Third World division: a few monstrously rich people—130 billionaires—and a gigantic, growing class of ultra-poor, with a quarter of the population living on \$2 a day. The traditional Russian response to despair is to get drunk, and alcoholism is now worse even than in the days of Leonid Brezhnev, who used a previous oil boom to ensure that his haggard people at least had enough sausage, medals, and vodka to keep them placid.

But there is one huge, important difference. Private life is now free. You may say and think what you like and nobody will put you in a camp or claim that you are insane and

pump you full of mind-altering drugs. Only if you offer a direct, open challenge to authority will you be troubled—and then generally by the tax police or the fire authorities who would rather put you out of business than into jail.

Most people, understandably, are willing to accept this squalid but comfortable bargain. The fanciful idea that prosperity would automatically engender freedom, that if you give a man a Mercedes he will want a civil society, is as untrue in Russia as it is in China.

As I walked through this strange, rejuvenated city, the heart of an authoritarian tyranny that threatens itself but no longer the heart of a totalitarian ideology that threatens us, I remembered the many things about it that had most disturbed me in Soviet days but have now faded.

I recalled the little mosquito-haunted park with its statue of Pavlik Morozov, the Communist martyr. Morozov, a mythical creature who may not even have existed, denounced his father to the secret police for some anti-party crime. The horrible creature's grandfather then, not unreasonably, murdered this unnatural brat. Morozov was turned into a national hero for putting his loyalty to party above loyalty to family.

A Russian friend once shamefacedly confessed to me that she had been taken on ritual pilgrimages to honor Morozov's statue. His school, in the Urals, became an actual shrine. This respectable lady, who without any embarrassment would regularly lay flowers on a nearby monument to the KGB chief Yuri Andropov, felt that the worship of the Morozov cult was the most disturbing and shocking facet of her upbringing.

I remembered the horrible little nurseries, baby farms where Moscow mothers would park their children while they went off to spend their days at compulsory jobs. Life was arranged so that families needed two Soviet salaries to pay for the necessities of life, so hardly any mothers could afford to stay at home. I remembered the way that almost every adult I met was divorced. I remembered the way that abortion was the favored method of birth control.

I recalled the contempt and loathing for religion that had been successfully drummed into almost every professional person, combined with a gross ignorance of what the great faiths actually said. Above all, I concluded that the two things revolutionaries hated most

were the stable married family and religious faith.

And I remembered coming back to the West, full of optimism, in 1992. And then I remembered seeing, year by year, in my own country and the U.S., new versions of all these subtle horrors: the "children's rights" movement that encourages denunciation and sets children against their parents, the shoving of infants into daycare from an incredibly early age, the need for two salaries to pay the basic bills, the epidemic of divorce, the pandemic of abortion, the growing spiteful rage against faith. I saw all around me the construction of a system of thought that dismissed conservative, individualist points of view as intolerable and pathological. I saw public servants, academics, and broadcasters having their careers ruined—and in Britain being questioned by the police—

for expressing incorrect opinions. Private life, in the modern West, is now becoming significantly less free than it is in post-ideological Moscow.

I have begun to suspect that the bacillus of revolution, once confined inside the borders of the USSR, did not die with Communism. On the contrary, it adapted itself and escaped in a new form. Now it rages busily in a world where, instead of storming the Winter Palace, the post office, and the railroad station, the enemies of freedom infiltrate the TV studio, the college campus, and the school. There is a new Cold War after all, but it is being fought inside our borders, without tanks or missiles. ■

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Children of '68

De Gaulle restored order, but the radicals won.

By Neil Clark

IN ONE CORNER, a 77-year-old general from an old aristocratic family, a war hero, and the ruler of his country for the past ten years. In the other, a red-headed young anarchist, preaching the language of liberation and revolution.

Charles de Gaulle was portrayed by the 1968 rioters in Paris as a right-wing reactionary—an old fuddy-duddy hopelessly out of touch with the spirit of the times. Daniel "Dany le Rouge" Cohn-Bendit, unofficial leader of the student rioters, was billed as the radical "progressive." But 40 years on, it's clear that the real hero of 1968—and the man whom history has totally vindicated—was de Gaulle.

The French president was no right-wing dictator à la General Franco. Distrustful of politicians—he once famously declared "politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians"—de Gaulle saw referenda as the best way for a leader to divine the wishes of his people. Always distrustful of the power of money and market fundamentalism, he introduced a mixed economy, a welfare state, and presided over the biggest rise in living standards for ordinary people in French history. "He was a man who did not care for those who owned wealth; he despised the bourgeois and hated capitalism" was the verdict of de Gaulle's biographer Jean Lacouture.