



The strategic importance of remembrance

In November 1917, a relatively small group of armed Communists took power in some parts of Russia. Their ideology consisted of a set of ideas radically severed from what until then had been considered as a basic prerequisite of any societal, political and economic order that aspired to last. The glaring absurdity of the Communist ideology led the overwhelming majority of observers to believe that the Soviet system would soon implode.

But not only did the expected implosion not take place, but – on the contrary – Soviet Communist power marched on for decades, conquering country after country until it towered over the world like an invincible ogre. It was only thanks to American military might that the Communist Empire did not conquer the whole world – either by direct invasion or by internal terror unleashed by local Communists.

Seas of ink and mountains of paper were used for texts analysing the Communist Empire. Many specialised departments and institutions – not to speak of innumerable pundits – devoted themselves to the task of observing, analysing and trying to understand the system whose existence shaped the twentieth century. The research was anything but merely academic endeavour as all political establishments and intelligence services outside the direct reach of the Communist Empire tried to understand its power.

But seemingly to no avail. It was a mischievous irony of historical proportions and not the accumulated wisdom of Sovietologists that celebrated its triumph. While at the dawn of Communist power almost every observer expected its speedy demise; in its twilight years almost every observer expected it to mellow and decay slowly for decades. Very few people predicted its swift disappearance.

Thus one would expect that once this unexpected event took place and the Ogre lay dead there would be a great rush for knowledge of what invisible secrets kept the Ogre going for so long and what invisible weaknesses made him tumble so suddenly. Now when millions of people who were forced to be the flesh and bone of the Ogre are at last free to talk without fear, there is a golden window of opportunity to gather a critical mass of information which would demystify the mystery, reveal the secret and decipher the enigma of Communist power.

But there has been no such rush. This lack of interest may perhaps be understandable as regards the huge majority of academics and journalists who derive their right to preach to the ignorant by the alleged superiority of their insight. They were proved to suffer from colossal blindness and have thus a vested interest in seeing the whole Communist episode forgotten, the sooner the better. On the other hand, political and military establishments and security and intelligence services whose prime task is to understand power would be expected to eagerly dissect the Ogre's corpse – at least in order to be better equipped for future encounters with other unintelligible evils. But again nothing is happening. Even a sinful lust for some new and as yet unknown secrets of the technology of power is inexplicably dormant.

Each year some witnesses pass away and the memories of those who remain are fading. The fact that almost no perpetrators of the monstrous crimes of the Communist Empire were brought to trial and punished is a shame which will haunt our century. But at least some of the crimes have been documented albeit with horrifying uncertainty of plus a million here, minus a million there. However, the fact that those inhabitants of the Empire who were not murdered or imprisoned had to live in self-inflicted moral numbness in order to remain safe from diverse punishments is almost never taken as relevant.

This fact makes the panorama of Communism fatally incomplete because the ultimate crime of Communism is not that it destroyed democracy and the rule of law. Not even murdering its opponents makes it uniquely evil. Even its murderous frenzies when people were murdered just to instil terror in those left alive could not be regarded as unparalleled in history. Its ultimate crime consisted in forcing millions of people for decades to express publicly and cheerfully their consent with something they regarded as criminal, untrue or idiotic. The numbness was thus for all but a few the only way to preserve their sanity. But it is exactly this numbness which points to the secret of Communist Power – and to the secret of its undoing as well. So the lack of any research in this regard is not only a dismal moral failure to bring this immense suffering to daylight, but also an even less understandable failure of self-interest. The Red Ogre is dead – that is sure – but he was not the last one to threaten mankind – he was only the latest.

And, indeed, a new ogre may just be emerging. On September 11 a new hideous inspiration declared itself openly to the world. It achieved that by demonstrating its feasibility. We have to confess we did not think it to be such until it happened. September 11 revealed with glaring clarity that the security establishments in the West were totally blind to some facets of reality out there or, rather, in there – in the workings of the human soul. There they are going again. It is true that this fledgling ogre will be different from the red one in many regards, but I am sure that none of these differences will touch the substance. It is also true that this time military action is being undertaken while the terrorist headquarters are as yet sheltered by relatively very weak states. No such timely action was taken against the Bolsheviks when they were barely standing on their feet. But as the fight against this terrorism will be long, we should not repeat the failure of misunderstanding or, rather, “nonunderstanding” the enemy.

It is therefore our final opportunity to subject the enemy to vigorous scrutiny down to the very core from which they derive their moral inspiration, methods of recruitment and infiltration and their hope of ultimate success. This is the only way of arriving at the correct strategy of defeating them. I am sure that the first fruit of the scrutiny will be an understanding of how the behaviour of us “non-terrorists” could – if not changed as soon as possible – nourish seeming terrorists’ conviction that their undertaking is not doomed to fail. With a bitter feeling of déjà-vu I observe the same silly non-logic at work in too many comments in the public place as I had the displeasure to see during the long totalitarian night. There is no place here to elaborate on that point- suffice it to say that the authors of the comments derived no lessons whatsoever from the rise and fall of Communism.

But it must be admitted that the poor devils have nowhere to turn for the learning, as there is yet no well-established mass of facts illuminating the innermost essence of that inhuman power.

The best way to compile the required mass is to interview as many witnesses as it is feasible – from the most obscure street sweepers up to former top apparatchiks. The interviews should aim at finding out their perception of what was going on, what they really thought about it, why they behaved the way they did, what they were afraid of, whether they hoped for any change, how they regarded the outside world, etc., etc.

It should be carried out in several former Communist countries in order to throw light on the extent to which the practice of the regimes was coloured by local history, political and social traditions that accrued before the falling of the totalitarian night without, however, touching the substance.

The cost of carrying such a project would be infinitesimally smaller than the cost of the present war on terrorism. But it would yield immense benefits for its successful conclusion.

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