

# Communism's Lingering Grip on Soul and Society: 'Generations of Devastation'

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People commemorate the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre at the Victims of Communism Memorial in Washington on June 3, 2024. Madalina Vasiliu/The Epoch Times

OPINION

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## Commentary

Near Atlanta, on a spring day in 1990, I was outside, underneath a large tent with dozens of others seated at tables, each facing a telephone.

I was six years old and when the call connected to a boy on the other end of the phone who sounded like he was my age.

**Share** had no other concept of who he was. I wasn't sure what to ask him, but knew something important was happening because my parents were very excited.



I learned the boy on the other side of the phone was from East Berlin. He spoke English with an accent, yet I could understand him clearly.



Perhaps with some coaching, I asked him, "What's different now here you live?"



"We can visit our family on the other side of the city," he answered.

I remember my confusion at that moment. I thought: What sort of place would prohibit someone from visiting his family? Despite hearing often how my father's family worked hard to immigrate to the United States from Poland, to me this was still an alien concept. How could a society become so repressive, and a people so downtrodden, that to cross a city became an impossibility, or a **great feat of defiance**?

Many alive today have no more sense than I did at six, how this—and a thousand other lost opportunities, dehumanizing degradations, and unimaginable injustices—shaped our world at communism's peak. Decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe, many regard those events as distant history — if they even remember them at all. But the spirit of authoritarian control haunts us still, ready to overtake us if we fail to defend our liberty from, as the Nobel laureate F.A. Hayek called them in his dedication to *The Road to Serfdom*, "the socialists of all parties."

# Everyone's a Victim

Reflecting on the tyranny of communist rule, we often think of the large-scale horrors: forced starvations, prison camps, and summary executions.

It is incumbent on us to remember those victims, and to witness their sacrifices. The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation estimates that [100 million people](#) around the world have died from the repression instituted to enforce communist regimes.

This legitimate focus on deaths means we neglect the smaller yet compounding consequences of the state's command and control over every detail of life, which affect generations in ways we'll never fully understand.

Many people recall [Stalin's purges](#) against the Russian Orthodox Church, which killed tens of thousands and saw the number of churches fall from 50,000 to just 500 by 1939. Far fewer remember the communist-enforced atheism in Czechoslovakia, which contributed to the Czech Republic today being one of the most irreligious societies in the world, a social condition that is linked to declining marriage, lower birth rates, and a general distrust of social institutions (religious and secular).

These are unseen costs of communism, and its victims go far beyond [the murdered martyrs](#) and [famous dissidents](#) that history remembers.

In the 1950s in Poland, my grandfather, a bridle maker, was interrogated with a bright light in his face for the crime of buying a piece of leather from a nearby town. My grandmother had to hitchhike to the prison to retrieve him, after which they began planning to leave the only home they had known to start a better life in the United States. There was no way for them to live a peaceful and fulfilling life in Poland without joining the Communist Party they despised.

Being a member of the Communist Party was the only way my grandparents could qualify to get a car, or rather, to join the [10-year waiting list](#) to potentially get a car. Their friend, a well-connected diplomat in Warsaw, had a car for each day of the week.

Tell a high school student with a Che Guavara sticker on her MacBook that she can't have a car and she may second guess her choice of political idol. That is if she hasn't already heard about the hundreds of people he executed.

## Communism's True Nature

The superficial allure of communism is eradicating poverty by placing all members of society on an equal material footing.

But the devil is in the details. Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto explained clearly how this would be achieved: "The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property."

Communism, however, is so much more repressive than the government merely stealing a person's property.

To accomplish their aims, communist states must break the natural ways that people think and behave, then attempt to retrofit anti-social behaviors in their place.

Among these goals and tactics are forced association—for example, by limiting access to cars to only those who join the Communist Party, or by outlawing competing social institutions such as the Church.

Not only was private property outlawed, but, as my grandfather discovered, so was trade at even the smallest scale.

As economist Ronald Coase differentiated importantly, "The law of property determines who owns something, but the market determines how it will be used."

Neither acquiring property nor deciding how to use it was permitted under communism. Only the state was empowered, so all personal choices were crimes against the state, even if the choice was to hide a handful of beans or gather rotting grain or pick through garbage to save your children from starvation.

Marx and his ilk also saw the “bourgeois family” as merely an economic instrument to provide for capitalist inheritance and to subjugate women. Weakening the institution of family was one of the explicit targets of those implementing communism, prompting government programs to remove children from their homes under the auspices of “public schooling.”

This also helped train children to inform on their parents if they failed to comply with the Party Line.

The Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn served eight years in a labor camp for criticizing Stalin in a private letter to a friend which was intercepted by secret police. There, beginning in the frozen February of 1945, he experienced some of the most direct repression of the communist regime in the Soviet Union.

He was allowed to return from exile, but his 1968 book, “The Gulag Archipelago,” had to be smuggled out of Russia on microfilm. In it he warned: “We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future.”

## Generations of Devastation

Unlimited government powers required to impose communist rule are grotesque, and inevitably violent.

Free people who are brought under communist rule reject these new government mandates, often paying for their insubordination with their lives. For the generations who come afterward, however, force, surveillance, and privation become facts of life.

Even when individual residents of communist countries were spared physical force, such pervasive control erodes free thought and individuality. Enforcing a drastically unrealistic conformity, it compels people to surrender their property and children to the state, destroying not only life, but also happiness.

Communism doesn't liberate—it controls. In every communist regime, the state either bans or mandates what each person can do, disregarding their personal knowledge of what's best for themselves and their families.

The victims of communism aren't only those who paid with their lives, but every sort of “nonconformist,” such as members of any racial, religious, political, economic, academic, or sexual minority.

Entire societies have been driven to collective madness just to survive under the grip of states that would relocate entire rural villages to urban apartment blocks as in Romania; send millions of students and intellectuals to rural areas to undertake manual labor as in China's Cultural Revolution, and; [criminalize consensual homosexual activity as in the Soviet Union](#) until Russia repealed those five-year prison sentences in 1993.

Under the auspices of establishing a utopian society, communist states exploited historical prejudices and superstitions.

In the eyes of the rulers of the communist state, any quality that makes an individual unique is a threat to social cohesion and one-party rule and is therefore something to be destroyed. The individual is merely a pawn to be played for the greater good without regard for his humanity or individuality, which becomes more restrained with each passing day of repression.

The Czech poet and political prisoner (and former president of the Czech Republic) Václav Havel described the slow yet certain erosion of humanity under communism:

“The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.”

The tragic legacy of this failed ideology didn’t collapse with the Berlin Wall in 1989. Communism and its authoritarian siblings linger, subtly twisting our souls and our societies, and misshaping our world today in ways both subtle and profound.

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