

Worker's ice pick

Free Earth

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This essay is written in response to the book “Blackshirts and Reds” by Michael Parenti, a large part of which is taken up with apologetics for, and praise of, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its satellites .

This is not some minor dispute, or idle debate, but is of great relevance.

It derives its relevance from the presence in every corner of the globe of adherents of Sovietophilia , people and organisations whose goal is the replication of the USSR (at whatever period in its history), in most parts of the world this is not a likely prospect, but nonetheless this phenomenon is a harmful one . Why so? Firstly because of their tendency to recreate/maintain central features of existing society within social movements capable of changing society, principally that is the division between order givers and order takers, something seemingly as dear to their hearts as it is to the heart of any boss, politician or corporate chairman . Thereby nullifying the liberatory potential of these movements . Secondly by discrediting the idea that there is an alternative to capitalism . For instance, during the September 26th 2000 demonstration against the World Bank/IMF in Prague they came covered with hammers and sickles, red stars and other such symbols of peace and freedom and were given great prominence in the local media – each photo saying take your pick the tyranny of the state or the tyranny of the market. Of course now that the “Soviet” Union has been cast into the dust bin of history , its place as the recipient of groupie’s accolades has been taken by Cuban dictatorship, lately embraced by well known major label revolutionaries the Manic Street Preachers, nonetheless the “Soviet” Union was, and is the original model and as such retains a relevance today. But I will say one thing about Cuba, or rather I’ll let a representative of the Cuban State controlled Trade Union movement say something: “There were some initial inequalities between those workers working in Cuban companies and those in the joint ventures” (i.e. joint ventures between the Cuban state and multi-nationals) ; however “The Cuban Workers’ Confederation is working to improve conditions in the state-owned companies.”¹

Need I comment? This was actually published in a pro-Castro newspaper under the heading “Workers’ Rights in Cuba”.

Mine is an essay, Parenti’s is a book , so I cannot deal with every single assertion, with every point, I have instead homed in on a number of crucial areas of concern.

Parenti defends the USSR on the following grounds: firstly, its moral superiority over capitalist states ; secondly, by arguing that its deformation was caused by the civil war, imperialist encirclement etc...; thirdly, by claiming that its “Left anti-Communist” and “pure socialist” critics have no, and offer no, practical alternative to what he calls the “siege socialism” of the Soviet Empire ; and finally by trying to downsize the extent of repression. I will deal with each part of his defence of “Communist” tyranny in turn.

Some More Equal than Others.

According to Parenti : “in communist countries there was less economic inequality than under capitalism” . By economic inequality he means inequality of income, consumption and lifestyle presumably not regarding a situation where by the value produced by the labour of the majority is expropriated by a minority to be ‘economic inequality’ nor a situation where the bulk of economic activity is determined by a minority and imposed on the rest of society .

¹ Quoted in ‘An Phoblacht/Republican News’ 4 May 2000.

Still, his claim in regard to 'economic inequality' does not withstand examination. In the words of Foreign Minister Molotov "Bolshevik policy demands a resolute struggle against equalitarians as accomplices of the class enemy, as elements hostile to socialism."²

Orlando Figes, historian and author of 'Peasant Russia, Civil War' and 'A People's Tragedy' describes the opulent lifestyle of the new ruling class in the early days of the 'worker's state':

"Five thousand Bolsheviks and their families lived in the Kremlin and the special party hotels, such as the National and the Metropole, in the centre of Moscow. The Kremlin's domestic quarters had over 2,000 service staff and it's own complex of shops, including a hairdresser and a sauna, a hospital and a nursery, and three vast restaurants with cooks trained in France. Its domestic budget in 1920, when all these services were declared free, was higher than that spent on social welfare for the whole of Moscow. In Petrograd the top party bosses lived in the Astoria Hotel, recently restored to its formal splendour, after the devastation's of the revolution, as the First House of the Soviets. From their suites, they could call for room service from the 'comrade waiters', who were taught to click their heels and call them 'comrade master'. Long-forgotten luxuries, such as champagne and caviar, perfume and toothbrushes, were supplied in abundance. The hotel was sealed to the public by a gang of burly guards in black leather jackets. In the evening government cars were lined up by the entrance waiting to take the elite residents off to the opera or to the Smolny for a banquet."³

This was at a time when many of the common people of Russia were literally starving to death. Erwin Weit, one time interpreter for the fat chieftains of Polish "communism", relates his insight into "private enrichment" Eastern Bloc style, how privileged State officials were able to use their privilege to enrich themselves:

"I got into a conversation with some embassy officials which taught me a good deal about the 'private enterprise sidelines' indulged in by the Polish diplomats in Berlin... Since they saw no reason to hide their transactions from me they were quite willing to explain. 'You see, Comrade Weit, in Warsaw anyone can buy a Soviet-made Zorki camera for 2,000 zlotys in a state shop. But the cheapest car on the market, an East German 'Trabant' ... costs at least 85,000 zlotys on the black market. Since we have the right to travel freely between East and West Berlin we can take the cameras into West Berlin at any time. We have a buyer there who will give us 70 dollars for them. At a rough estimate if you convert 70 dollars into West German marks they are worth about 800 East German marks. And a Trabant car costs 7,200 East German marks. In Warsaw we can buy nine Zorki cameras for 18,000 zlotys. And in exchange for these 18,000 zlotys we make 85,000 zlotys when we sell the car in Poland. So we make a clear profit of nearly 70,000 zlotys.' I made a few calculations in my head. Since the average wage in Poland is about 2,000 zlotys per month they could make as much from a single transaction of this kind as an ordinary Polish worker would earn in two and a half years."⁴

² Quoted in 'State Capitalism in Russia' by Tony Cliff page 69.

³ From 'A People's Tragedy. A History of the Russian Revolution' by Orlando Figes page 683.

⁴ From 'Eyewitness : The Autobiography of Gomulka's Interpreter' by Erwin Weit page 123.

The income of the party bosses and state bureaucrats was bloated not only through the perks of position, and opportunities for corruption, considerable though they were, but also through their official income, for example, during the Second World War a private in the Red Army got ten roubles a month, lieutenants 1000, and colonels 2,400. By contrast, in that well known bastion of socialism, the U.S. Army, privates got 50 dollars a month, lieutenants 150, and colonels 333. American soldiers of the time did not have F.B.I. machine gunners behind them to make sure they didn't retreat, nor were they imprisoned for the crime of being imprisoned by the enemy, nonetheless the USSR is a utopia and the U.S.A. an evil empire.

Golden Cages?

According to Parenti, in what he calls communist countries "priority was placed on human services" the evidence for this is "guaranteed education, employment, housing, and medical assistance" representing "something different from what existed in the profit-driven capitalist world" this is an "organising principle for every communist system to one degree or the other" and does not "apply to free market countries". State welfare programs began in Germany under Bismarck and in Britain in Victorian times (or earlier i.e. 'relief work', 'workhouses', etc.), they received a boost in Britain when it was discovered that recruits were not healthy enough for the army. They continue to exist to this day, to a greater or lesser extent, in all West European states. Obviously advanced capitalism requires a healthy, housed and educated workforce and furthermore it needs to introduce reforms from now and then when the grumblings from below get too loud, in any case we pay for it all in our taxes. As regards employment currently the Republic of Ireland has less unemployment than contemporary Cuba and besides let's not kid ourselves "guaranteed employment" is a polite term for compulsory exploitation. In any case the social policy of "Communist" states ranged from welfarism similar to Western Europe (but not as good) to 'social cleansing' similar to Latin America (i.e. the extermination of those left as orphans by the Civil War and famine). Romania's orphanages are hardly world renowned as the zenith of social welfare and State health care.

Not then "something different from what existed in the profit driven capitalist world".

According to Parenti: "in communist countries, productive forces were not organised for capital gain and private enrichment; public ownership of the means of production supplanted private ownership".

In "communist" states the state owned the means of production as the public did not control the state we cannot therefore speak of "public ownership". In reality the means of production was controlled by the Nomenklatura ruling class and organised for "capital gain and private enrichment" as is evident from the mere fact of minority control. Unless that is you believe in the existence of such wonderful selfless people who invested with absolute power proceeded to use it to for the benefit of all and not for "capital gain and private enrichment" while time and time again the ungrateful proles of one country and then another rose against them.

The "Socialist" Empire.

According to Parenti "communist countries did not pursue the capital penetration of other countries. Lacking a profit motive as their driving force and therefore having no need to con-

stantly find new investment opportunities, they did not expropriate the lands, labor, markets, and natural resources of weaker nations, that is, they did not practise economic imperialism.”

I'm sure it was a great relief to the Polish prisoners massacred in Katyn forest that the USSR did not in fact 'practise economic imperialism'. In any case, what Parenti is saying here is just plain wrong. Those areas which became independent from the Russian Empire, or attempted to, during the Revolution, for example, the Ukraine or the Baltic states, and which were later incorporated into the USSR at gunpoint, had their entire economies, all the land, all the natural resources, etc., expropriated ('nationalised under public ownership') by Moscow. The Bolshevik invaders of the Ukraine in 1918 were exhorted by Lenin to "send grain, grain and more grain"⁵, that country performing the same function for Moscow as it did for Berlin during the two world wars. Executions for the crime of speaking Ukrainian was however a Leninist innovation. Moving on to the post-W.W.2 period we find 'Soviet Shareholding Companies' as well as mixed companies (jointly owned by the USSR and the local state) owning much of the heavy industry of Russian occupied Eastern Europe. This was brought about by the seizure of all German held property while in East Germany itself the pretext for this confiscation was the political views of the previous owners. In any case the 'surplus value' (that share of the value produced not required to maintain the existence of the worker) extracted from the employees of these firms was now going not to "National Socialist" capitalists in Germany but to "Communist" capitalists in Russia. Likewise colonial trade relations existed between occupied Eastern Europe and the 'socialist motherland' with the USSR buying cheap and selling dear to this it's captive market. This was also true in regard to Red China and Yugoslavia which is why of course they broke away from the bear's embrace. Furthermore those countries which had been ruled by indigenous government which were part of the Axis were hit with a massive reparations bill.

Civil War

The question as to whether the Bolsheviks were forced into authoritarian, hierarchical and dictatorial methods, forced into the establishment of State capitalism, or "Siege socialism" as Parenti calls it, by the practical necessities of civil war or whether all this was inherent in Leninism all along, and the natural product of Leninist ideology, is actually not too difficult to answer. We merely have to look at the record of the Bolsheviks prior to the civil war. If this was a lab experiment we would have a 'subject' that is to say Bolshevism plus civil war and a 'control' that is to say Bolshevism minus civil war and by looking at the difference between the two we can ascertain the effect of the civil war. The civil war didn't really heat up until the Summer of 1918 with the offensive of the Czech Legion and the establishment of the Komuch (an alternative Social Revolutionary led government). Allied intervention reached a new level at this time as well with the landing of a Allied force in Vladivostok (the British section of it was under a Labour party M.P. and comprised of old soldiers unfit of service on the Western front) — previously British troops had landed in Murmansk as an anti-German action. There was a low level of violence prior to this, consisting of very small armies and very small casualty figures, for example the famous 'ice march' carried out by the White 'volunteer army' in the extreme south of Russia involved only 4,000 soldiers. On the 3rd of March 1918 the brief hostilities between Berlin and

⁵ Quoted in 'The Harvest of Sorrow : Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror Famine' by Robert Conquest page 35.

the Bolsheviks were ended ; on the 10th of April 1918 the volunteer and Cossack white armies (the only anti-Bolshevik armed forces of any substance at this time) were well defeated; so the article on ‘The immediate tasks of the Soviet Government’, written by Lenin and published on the 25th of April 1918 , could be considered our ‘control’ i.e. Leninism minus military threat ; all the more so given that on March 14th 1918 Lenin said “The Soviet Government has triumphed in the Civil War” and again on April 23rd he said “One can say with certainty that the Civil War in its main phases has been brought to an end”.⁶

Furthermore this was before the failure of the German revolution dimmed hopes of spreading ‘socialism’ to the more advanced states .

In this article Lenin writes : “We must raise the question of piece-work and apply and test it in practise ... we must raise the question of applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system.”

“The irrefutable experience of history has shown that ... the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle , the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes.”

“Large-scale machine industry – which is the material productive source and foundation of socialism – calls for absolute and strict unity of will ... How can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one”.

“ Unquestioning submission (emphasis in original) to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of labour processes that are based on large-scale machine industry ... today the Revolution demands , in the interests of socialism , that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will (emphasis in original) of the leaders of the labour process.”⁷

Note the building of socialism requires “thousands subordinating their will to the will of one” in other words submission to authority is an inherent prerequisite of socialism not a temporary expedient employed to win the civil war or to maintain ‘socialism in one country’.

“Communist” political repression and class oppression likewise dates back to before the civil war began in earnest . The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Struggle against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage or Cheka (later known as the N.K.V.D. , G.P.U. , K.G.B. and currently F.S.B.) was established on the 7th of December 1917 . It’s definition of ‘counter-revolution’ and ‘sabotage’ included absenteeism from work and private trading (which was a necessity) . All non-Bolshevik political factions were to fall victim to the Cheka within the first year of it’s operations, within it’s first month the infamous Peter and Paul fortress in St Petersburg was filled to the brim with political prisoners. On the night of April the 11th 1918 (again during our ‘control’ period) Cheka units raided 26 anarchist centres in Moscow , killing 40 in the initial fighting and arresting over 500.

The terror was not just a means of disposing of dissidents but also a means of labour discipline, to quote Lenin again, this time writing in December 1917, : “In one place they (i.e. the Cheka) will put into prison a dozen rich men, a dozen scoundrels, half a dozen workers who shirk on the job.... (my emphasis)” ; “one out of every ten idlers will be shot”.⁸

⁶ Quoted in ‘The Guillotine at Work : Volume 1 : The Leninist Counter-Revolution’ by Gregory Petrovich Maximoff page 53.

⁷ Quoted in ‘The Bolsheviks and Workers Control : 1917 to 1921 : the State and Counter-Revolution ‘ by Maurice Brinton pages 40/41.

⁸ Quoted in ‘A People’s Tragedy. A History of The Russian Revolution’ by Orlando Figes page 524.

International Capitalism Made Me Do It.

Then we have the famous fourteen Imperialist armies or the “fourteen capitalist nations” as Parenti calls them. Who were they? Well we have Turkey, Germany and Austria-Hungary for starters all of whom were ousted from the territory of the Russian empire as a result of their defeat in the First World War. Then we have the Allied intervention which really took off after the First World War, that is the intervention of the Britain, France, Japan, the United States, Italy and Canada. Then we have newly independent Poland involved in intermittent incursions into the what is now the Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania culminating in the offensive into Bolshevik occupied Ukraine in the spring of 1920. Count them that’s ten states, or seven really as the Central Powers pulled out early in the game and only had a very minimal involvement in the beginning of the civil war.

Where/who are the other four? or seven? Is it? Georgia, the Ukraine, Finland, who by declaring their independence from Russia (in most cases later to be quashed by the state which to quote Parenti “provided vital assistance to national liberation movements in countries around the world.” — around the world perhaps meaning as far away from the U.S.S.R. as possible) could be said to have invaded the Soviet Union, even if only someone cloned by the Kremlin would say this. Perhaps the fourteen includes the Czech legion — a force of former war prisoners and nationalist activists fighting for Czech independence on the side of Russia in the great war and later to clash with the Bolsheviks. Or perhaps the other four are the different white armies of Russia, a neat trick presenting the Whites as more formidable than they actually were by counting their weakness i.e. division as a strength. Or perhaps New Zealand, South Africa and Australia were also involved, though I find no mention of them in the official history of the Communist party or elsewhere.

In any case why are you questioning this I hear you cry and ignoring that far more interesting and pressing concern — the single-handed victory of the Red Army over the combined forces of the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Canada and Japan plus the White Armies, and the various nationalist forces which would be surely the single most amazing event in world history especially when you consider that only a matter of months before the Bolsheviks could not even resist imperial Germany alone. It would be the single most amazing event in world history except for the fact that it is beaten into third place by the ability of the establishments in those countries to obscure the extent of their intervention from the public and by the ability of the Polish state that well known militaristic, imperialist super-power to defeat the Red Army in 1920 thereby achieving a feat which all the others together could not do. Or perhaps all is not as it seems and this ‘Allied intervention’ was not all it was cracked up to be. To quote Voline, a Russian anarchist sent into exile by both of Russia’s absolutist regimes :

“According to legend, that intervention was highly important. It is primarily in this way that the Bolsheviks explain the strength and success of some of the white movements. That assertion, however, belies reality. It is a gross exaggeration. In fact, the foreign intervention during the Russian Revolution was never either vigorous or persevering. A modest amount of aid, in money, munitions, and equipment: that was all. The Whites themselves complained bitterly of [its paucity] later on. And as for the

detachments of troops sent to Russia, they always were of minor significance and played almost no tangible part.”⁹

Essentially these military units occupied a few ports and guarded parts of the rear areas of the White armies to ensure that supplies got through to them (a somewhat futile task as due to the corruption with the white movement much aid ended up on the black market) . The main body of Allied troops appears to have been centred on the port of Vladivostok , those of you unfamiliar with the distance between Moscow and Vladivostok think London to Hong Kong.

No Alternative?

Says Parenti: “But a real socialism, it is argued , would be controlled by the workers themselves through direct participation instead of being run by Leninists, Stalinists, Castroites, or other ill-willed, power hungry, bureaucratic cabals of evil men who betray revolutions. Unfortunate, this ‘pure socialism’ view is ahistorical and nonfalsifiable; it cannot be tested against the actualities of history. It compares an ideal against an imperfect reality , and the reality comes off a poor second.....The pure socialists’ ideological anticipations remain untainted by existing practise. They do not explain how the manifold functions of a revolutionary society would be organised, how external attack and internal sabotage would be thwarted, how bureaucracy avoided, scarce resources allocated, policy differences settled, priorities set, and production and distribution conducted.”

In refuting this argument we must keep in mind a number of things: firstly Parenti is ignoring the “existing practise” of just about any revolution worthy of the name for they all included directly democratic aspects which “pure socialists” or “Left anti-Communists” see as the answer to the questions he raises and from whence we derive our ideas; secondly a revolution is a mass movement of the people, by the people, for the people, it is a creative act produced by, who shall I say the public? the people? so the average guy reading this knows what I’m on about or the proletariat? so the robots from the Red planet reading this will not accuse me of lacking a “materialist class analysis” or some such; and finally a number of “pure socialists” active during the Russian revolution published works which have been translated into English and answer, at least in part or attempt to, the questions he raises .

We can see these three points and the answer to Parenti’s argument in the following snapshot of an “actuality of history” of “existing practise” in Kronstadt during the Russian Revolution:

“All matters concerning public services in Kronstadt and the internal life of the city were administered by the citizens themselves, through the medium of house committees and militia, and little by little they advanced towards the socialisation of dwellings and of all urban services. Generally speaking, at Kronstadt and elsewhere in Russia before the enthronement of the Bolsheviki, the inhabitants of a house first organised a number of tenants’ meetings. These meetings named a tenants’ committee, which consisted of men who were energetic and capable of fulfilling some necessary function.

⁹ From ‘The Unknown Revolution’ by Voline page 431.

The Committee supervised the upkeep of the house and the welfare of the inhabitants, it designated the day and night janitors, etc.. Each House Committee delegated one of its members to the Street Committee, which was in charge of matters that concerned the whole street. Then came the District Committee, the Borough Committee and finally the City Committee, which was concerned with the interests of the whole city and , in a natural and logical manner, carried out whatever centralisation of services was necessary. The organisation of the militia was similar to that of the Committees : each house had a group of militiamen, drawn from the tenants ; there were also street militia, district militia, etc..”

“Another interesting constructive enterprise was a kind of horticultural commune which was set up when the inhabitants of Kronstadt used the empty land between the shores and the city for collective vegetable gardens. Groups of city people, consisting of about 50 persons living in the same district or working in the same shop, undertook to work the land in common. Each of these communities received from the city a plot of land chosen by lot. The community members were helped by specialists, surveyors and agronomists.

All questions of interest to members of these communities were discussed at meetings of delegates or in general assemblies.”

“These kitchen gardens rendered an important service to the inhabitants of Kronstadt, especially, during periods of famine, in 1918 and later.”¹⁰

That’s just a glimpse into a far wider phenomenon , but it serves to illustrate some guiding principles of democratic organisation . Firstly mass assemblies of all people in the area, workplace or army unit, in this case the tenants of a house, then the establishment of committees of delegates, mandated by the assembly, and finally their federation with other local committees to form an administration for a city or industry. During the Russian Revolution there was a proliferation of democratic organisations, the traditional peasant commune seized control of the landed estates, and organised trade with the cities; factory committees took control over workplaces ;there was a democratisation within the army, with officers elected by the men, a practise carried on into the Red Guard militia and into some of the partisan units of the Civil War . Similar directly democratic organisation is to be found in every revolutionary period.

This should answer much of Parenti’s argument . Though the answers to some of his questions are obvious e.g. how would “policy differences be settled” and could only be posed by an advocate of totalitarian “Marxist” dictatorship evidently unfamiliar with the concept of majority vote. Others, however , are more problematic, in particular “how external attack ...would be thwarted”. So I will turn again to the “actualities of history” , to the “existing practise” of the Russian Revolution , and to how “pure socialists” and “Left anti-Communists” active in the Russian Revolution explained their idea of meeting military threats .

In 1926 exiled veterans of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine published their answer to this particular question. Given as the Insurgent Army was considered cognisant enough with the business of thwarting eternal attack for the Bolsheviks to enter several alliances with them, and for the Bolsheviks to devote whole regiments to their destruction, it is fair to say that

¹⁰ Ibid. pages 456/457/458.

these veterans might know something of what they are talking about . Rather than localised partisan units they advocate “unity in the plan of operations and unity of common command”. They advocate voluntary service rather than conscription, as it was the Bolshevik’s conscription policy probably helped the Whites for it proved to be yet another policy alienating them from the peasantry .

In sharp contrast with the “Communist” party , they advocate “the total submission of the revolutionary army to the masses of the workers and peasants as represented by the worker and peasant organisations common throughout the country “¹¹ , in other words the army is to be subordinate to the sort of organisations described in the above extract on Kronstadt. Whereas the Red Army was the instrument not of a free people but of an absolutist state.

Only Seven Hundred and Ninety Nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Fifty Five.

Parenti points to archival documentation suggesting that between 1921 and 1953 a total of 799,455 executions were carried out by the N.K.V.D., thus the repression did not have the millions of victims as is claimed. The idea that perhaps the documentation does not exist appears not to have occurred to him, certainly it seems to me that for much of it’s history the Russian secret police has been too busy shooting to do much counting. Nonetheless, there is according to the literature a inconsistency in Soviet census results suggesting millions of missing persons in the 1930’s. Parenti doesn’t mention this. Ascertaining the death toll from earlier repression is more a matter of guesswork, but evidence from the writings and sayings of State functionaries would suggest a large numbers of deaths, larger than the figure from the N.K.V.D. archives. In any case suppose this is a matter of only 799,455 executions some of which may (as Parenti says) have been of non-political offenders and of wartime collaborators (Parenti mentions the “considerable numbers who collaborated” if the U.S.S.R. was such a wonderful society why would there be these “considerable numbers” ?) . I wish that these ‘socialists’ valued Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Latvian, Polish, Hungarian, Chinese, Cambodian , etc... lives as much as they value American lives ; if it was a matter of only 799,455 people or half that figure or an eight of that figure dying in political repression in the United States I think these ‘socialists’ would not be so quick to counterbalance the horror by speaking of the social achievements of American capitalism. During the 20th century political repression in the U.S.A. took hundreds of lives, at the same time in the U.S.S.R., if we accept Parenti’s argument , political repression took hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet Parenti praises the U.S.S.R. and damns the U.S..

A Footnote In History.

A footnote in Parneti’s chapter dealing with repression, giving what appears to be his sole mention of famine, reads “No doubt, the famines that occurred during the years of Western invasion, counter-revolutionary intervention, White Guard civil war, and landowner resistance to collectivisation took many victims.”

¹¹ From ‘Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists’ by Makhno, Mett, Archinov, Valevsky, Linsky, page 31.

You would never think it from that, but these famines to a large degree were caused by the policies of the “Communist” party state, this was the exclusive cause of the latter one. The first famine was the product of, partly, the legacy of Tsarist society, but principally of the Bolshevik policy of Grain Monopoly. The Grain Monopoly was instituted prior to the real beginnings of civil war and made the state the sole trader of grain (it was later extended to most food stuffs), under it the peasantry had to sell their produce to the state and accept a completely devalued currency as payment. Naturally, this, which was obviously coupled with the suppression of private trade, was not conducive to agricultural productivity. Worse was to come, this was followed by grain requisition which simply meant that armed “Communist” detachments extorted the products of peasant’s labour from them at gun point and frequently resorted to torture to find hidden stocks. Quotas were set at such a level that the producers were at times even left with insufficient food for themselves and insufficient seed for sowing. The result of this policy, which made zero economic or political sense, was major famine and millions of deaths. It is this and not “Western invasion, counter-revolutionary intervention, White Guard civil war ... “ which caused the famine. In fact the American Relief Association sent food supplies to Russia with the support of the American government and received praise from none other than Kremlin boss Kamenev for doing so.

I remember seeing a ‘Daily Worker’ cartoon of the time, criticising the lack of food aid for Russia, depicting the stereotype fat capitalist before a victim of starvation and saying (before doleing out the support) ‘But first what is your politics’ ; in actuality this was the Kremlin’s policy – food was diverted from disloyal areas.

The Good Old Days.

Parenti devotes much of his book to the effects of ‘capitalist restoration’ post 1989 and leaves much unanswered, principally he gives no account of why, if life pre-1989 was so good and life post-1989 so terrible, was there no massive reaction against this ‘capitalist restoration’ . It does not occur to him that perhaps the social problems of post-“Communist” Eastern Europe gestated in the 70’s and 80’s rather than springing into life fully born in 1990 .

He gives a long litany of the crimes of various “capitalist restorative” governments in Eastern Europe, but seems to be confused as to exactly what is “capitalist restoration” and what is “communism”. Witness the following description of one of those nasty restorers of capitalism (amazing the amount of these people produced in the upper echelons of “Communist” states) “a self -professed admirer of Adolph Hitler’s organisational skills, shut down the independent newspapers and radio stations “ (of course thousands of these were allowed to openly exist throughout the Eastern bloc in the good old days) “ and decreed the opposition parliament defunct.” (exactly as Lenin had done in 1918!). “ was awarded with absolute power in a referendum that claimed an inflated turnout, with no one knowing how many ballots were printed or how they were counted.” (all similarity to the ‘Soviet’ Union purely co-incidental) . “Some opposition leaders fled for their lives” (something never known to happen under “Communism”) . The only problem is that the politician so described is none other than Alexander Lukashenko, Tsar of Belarus, a state where not only is so-called “public ownership” very much alive and kicking (most of the economy is state-owned) but which retains much of the trappings of the U.S.S.R.. Likewise the leaders of Poland’s Solidarity party are attacked for various anti-Semitic outbursts, another

nasty innovation of 'capitalist restoration' ? Yes, but only yes if the anti-Semitic campaigns of the Polish "Communist" state are sent down Orwell's 'memory hole' into oblivion.

Ultimately, however, even Parenti can give no account of post-1989 'capitalist restoration' without reference to the discontent felt by the subjects of the "Communist" states . That said, he does manage to ignore the long history of uprisings and revolutions against the "Marxist-Leninist" system, which date right back to it's inception . His explanation for this discontent in utopia is priceless: "People took for granted what they had in the way of human services and entitlements while hungering for the consumer goods dangling in their imaginations. The human capacity for discontent should not be underestimated. "

"Once our needs are satisfied, then our wants tend to escalate , and our wants become our needs. A rise in living standards often incites a still greater rise in expectations. As people are treated better , they want more of the good things and are not necessarily grateful for what they already have."

"In 1989, I asked the G.D.R. ambassador in Washington, D.C. why his country made such junky two-cylinder cars. He said the goal was to develop good public transport and discourage the use of costly private vehicles. But when asked to choose between a rational, efficient, economically sound and ecologically sane mass transportation system or an automobile with it's instant mobility, special status, privac , and personal empowerment, the East Germans went for the latter, as do most people in the world."

I am reminded of Bertold Brecht's poem 'The Solution' :

"The Secretary of the Writer's Union Had leaflets distributed in Stalinallee Stating that the people Had forfeited the confidence of the government And could win it back only By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier In that case for the government To dissolve the people And elect another?"

Notes:

All quotations of Micheal Parenti are from his book 'Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism' , published by City Lights Books.

All comparisons between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic are purely for the purpose of exposing double standards and should not be taken as support for any state.

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