FAILURE OF COMMUNISM

During my many travels, I have seen first-hand the failed workings of the Communist political system around the globe. These include China (1982 & 1987), the Soviet Union (1984), Vietnam (2012), and Cuba (2016). I have yet to visit North Korea, however -- a reclusive Communist nation still very difficult to enter as an ordinary tourist.

It is said that even Lenin, the Russian Communist leader, admitted (shortly before his death in 1924) to the failure of Communism as a political philosophy. Unless human nature substantially changed sometime in the future, he realized, pure Communism as an ideology was doomed from the start. It was perfect in theory, but a disaster in practice.

Why?

Because people want to control their own lives. They want freedom to pursue their own personal dreams and opportunities. Most people naturally bristle at the thought of absolute governmental domination and its numbing, controlling constraints -- unless they are apathetic, submissive, or want the 'Nanny State' to take total care of them, from cradle to grave.

The yearning for individual achievement and social advancement is not selfishness. Such striving actually strengthens a given society and improves it for the benefit of all of its citizens. It fosters creativity and innovation. It provides employment for the dissemination of important goods and services. Although the capitalistic economic model is not perfect (both its heavy reliance on consumerism and its depletion of natural resources are obviously not unlimited), capitalism still provides for the needs of the largest number of people for the greatest good. Thus, until a better economic model can be invented to surpass it, capitalism is certainly the best system we have.

My wife, Alice, and I visited the former Soviet Union -- the U.S.S.R. -- on a small group tour for three weeks in 1984. We booked our trip through the Russian Travel Bureau out of New York City. Our fifteen fellow travelers were either active or retired professional people and their spouses: doctors, teachers, and assorted university-types . Our American tour guide was Anna (from Pennsylvania), and our official Soviet in-country guide was named Irene. We were joined by Irene once we arrived in Moscow after flying from New York via Helsinki on Aeroflot, the Russian national airline.

Other than Anna, who spoke fluent Russian, nobody in our tour group had been in the Soviet Union before. But all, like my wife and I, were very curious: Were the Soviets really our mortal enemy? Would they start World War III with a surprise nuclear missile attack on America? Were they as advanced as the United States? Was their system of Communism actually working? I kept a detailed daily journal to mark my experiences, and upon my return home, I was also interviewed and featured in several local newspapers regarding our trip.

Now, before I share my eyewitness impressions, you should know that I have nothing but compassion for the Russian people. I was treated with respect and kindness -- and a mixture of curiosity and even bewilderment ("Are you really from America??") -- by almost everyone we had interactions with in the U.S.S.R. Ethnically, the Russians are a Slavic people -- as are my ancestors, the Poles -- so in effect, they are like cousins to me. I have a warm affinity for their culture, history, and their Orthodox religion. The Russians have suffered greatly over the centuries, so I have much sympathy towards them. They are a proud, vast, and enduring country -- and certainly a resilient people in the extreme.

But what has the Communist government forced upon the Russian people since 1917 Bolshevik Revolution? Extermination of countless political dissidents in Siberian prison camps -- the horrid 'gulags.' Relentless repression, arrests, torture, and censorship. The attempted elimination of past history, belief in religion, and basic human freedoms. The Soviet dictator Josef Stalin alone killing over 30 million of his own citizens through oppression, 'cleansing' pogroms, failures in Central Planning, and starvation. All while the Party elite unfairly enjoyed lavish lifestyles in the new Red 'Worker's Paradise.'

It was grey and drizzling rain when we arrived in Moscow. At the international airport, our special entrance visas were seriously scrutinized, and our luggage carefully inspected: no Bibles or religious literature, no Western newspapers or magazines, no banned books allowed. Our American dollars were precisely inventoried. (Receipts for any purchases during our visit had to shown later when we exited the country; this discouraged any 'black market' money exchanging of U.S. dollars for rubles. Because the Russian ruble was not a 'hard currency,' it was virtually worthless outside of the Soviet Union. Dollars, therefore, were highly prized.)

Driving to our hotel through a countryside that resembled northern Wisconsin, with many pine and birch trees, we saw no advertisements or billboards -- only statues of Lenin and Soviet propaganda banners and posters as we approached the capital. We soon saw a dreary multitude of shoddily-built apartment blocks, because private property such as individual homes was unknown. The ordinary people we saw on the streets appeared poorly dressed (many in mismatched polyester track outfits), their faces somewhat pasty and blemished from presumably a lack of a more healthy diet. Although it was mid-June, the high temperature was a brisk sixty degrees F.

Inside our high-rise "Cosmos" hotel room (across the street from the Economic Achievement Pavilions park), we turned on the television, only to have the knob come off in my hand. The TV featured only three channels: black & white film documentaries about World War II; monotonous speeches being given at various governmental committee meetings; or a 'politically-correct' attempt at a contemporary family drama. All programming was in Russian, as expected. There was also a small desk radio that played pleasant classical music with no commercials. We next noted several dark cigarette burns in the room's wooden window sills and furniture, and on its thin carpeting. Downstairs in the lobby were racks of complimentary propaganda magazines, booklets, and leaflets available in English and other languages. One showed a scruffy homeless food line in some American city, with the headline: "Their Lot -- Living in the United States," implying that most people in the U.S. were either starving or homeless due to the ruthless capitalist class-structure!

Although our 'modern' hotel was already showing itself to be somewhat worn-out and threadbare, we quickly realized that this was the best the Soviets could offer to their important Western guests. The same went for our meals. We were given the best foods available, in an attempt to showcase the acclaimed success of Communism. Later, however, we learned that the average Russian could not even afford to eat in a restaurant, other than perhaps for a wedding or birthday. Often, our tour group members were the only patrons at the restaurants we ate in.

Whenever we briefly left the group to use a public toilet, for example, we were discreetly approached by wary locals and 'asked' through pantomime if we wanted to sell our shoes or a specific clothing item, or if we wanted to exchange rubles for dollars at a black market rate. We routinely declined, of course, for fear of being 'set up' or caught in any illegal activity and/or possibly get arrested. I always felt that we were being carefully watched by plainclothes State security personnel. We also strongly suspected that both Intourist and our local guide, Irene, were somehow connected to the KGB, the Soviet secret police.

On the streets of Moscow, we saw some staggering drunks, several beggars, and a few desperate pensioners attempting to sell antiques and other personal heirlooms for a few rubles. Their monthly pension checks of $27 (U.S. equivalent) were barely enough to keep them alive. The Communist system always touts its universal free education and medical care, as well as its subsidized housing (50% of one's monthly salary of $70) and cheap(especially for bread and vodka) food prices. And everyone is likewise said to be guaranteed a job.

But the reality is that the government decides where you can live, where you can go to school, and what kind of job you get. (Communist Party members -- only 9% of the citizenry -- get the best of everything, of course.) Newly married couples had to wait three to four years -- sometimes even up to ten years -- for their own apartment. While waiting, they had to live with parents in a crowded apartment, until their names on a list are called -- such was the Soviet housing shortage. Whenever we toured a hospital, meanwhile, the doctors in our group privately expressed horror at the crude medical equipment and practices, and the long wait for critical surgeries.

Again, as for employment in all fields, everyone got paid $70 a month. This was if you came to work or not, and likewise if you showed up sober or drunk. As a result, there was no incentive to work beyond the bare minimum. People would simply skip out of work for hours each day to do their necessary shopping, with no hindrance. No one was ever called to account or fired. This was because the average citizen had to wait up to three hours (!) in line, every day, just to get the ordinary supplies of daily life. There was one line to see if a particular product was available; then, you had to wait in a second line to pay for the item; finally, you waited in a third line with your receipt to collect the item. Because of constant shortages of vital products (e.g. soap, toothpaste, toilet paper), people would buy and then horde large amounts of items whenever they became available. Later, such necessaries would be bartered for other necessities, or sold secretly and illegally on the 'black market.' Many of the shops I discreetly explored (away from our 'official' group route) had several employees sitting around chatting and smoking cigarettes, with nothing to do. The product shelves were completely empty. A few of the food stores I peeked into were likewise barren, with the exception of a handful of withered leafy vegetables like cabbage, or a few spoiled potatoes.

Whenever it rained, the dilapidated cars on Moscow's streets (most people could only afford the bus or Metro for transportation) would stop in the middle of traffic and their drivers would jump out and attach their windshield wipers. This is because the wipers were removed and always kept locked inside the car's glove compartment unless it rained, due to rampant wiper theft.

At a public park, I saw a soft-drink dispensing machine. The liquid came out as expected, after you deposited a few kopek coins. But the drink went into a single dirty glass, which was reused by countless people, after they briefly wiped it down with a similarly filthy small towel! Individual paper or plastic cups were unheard of.

During one afternoon 'panel discussion' with two Soviet officials, we were invited to ask candid questions about the effectiveness of their system of government. I noted that there seemed to be problem with alcoholism in Moscow, from observing some staggering drunks clutching bottles on the streets. So why did the government make vodka so cheap (< 50 cents U.S./liter)? Wasn't that bad for society and the general public health? The officials immediately got defensive, and were adamant, "There is no alcoholism in the Soviet Union. You must be mistaken, comrade." The topic was then quickly dropped by our alert yet nervous Intourist guide, Irene, who acted as moderator.

There were, however, some very impressive aspects to our Moscow visit. The subway system was beautiful, with each station an artistic monument -- clean, inexpensive, safe, and free from any advertisements or graffiti. I enjoyed the gold, onion-domed cathedrals inside the Kremlin, and the former Czars' Imperial living quarters. I also liked the rich brown bread that we were served with every meal, and the borsht and caviar we sometimes had. Beef Stroganoff and Chicken Kiev were always a treat, as was delicious, rich Russian ice cream. The museums in the capital were excellent too, particularly its art gallery, the Tretyakov. Our group marveled at a wonderful Bolshoi ballet evening performance, and we later enjoyed an entertaining afternoon circus show. We also saw the interior of iconic St. Basil's Cathedral, and viewed the corpse of Lenin inside his glass coffin in a specially-constructed mausoleum.

Russian specialists are known to do quite well in the scientific, mathematical, and technical fields. The Soviets successfully orbited the first man-made satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, and launched the first man and the first woman in space. However, when American astronauts on a goodwill mission to the U.S.S.R. got a close look at the actual spacecrafts and equipment that the Soviets used in their space programs, they privately expressed shock at the primitive constructions and lack of safety measures. Indeed, many Soviet space missions crashed on land upon reentry -- killing their cosmonauts -- or exploded on the ground at take-off. Yet such disasters were never publicly acknowledged.

The Soviet Union was often referred to as a "Third World country with a First World military." They possessed thousands of deadly and effective nuclear missiles, and the United States needed to be on their guard 24/7 to protect our nation from any possible surprise attack, during this, the height of the Cold War. An odd reality struck me during our three-week group tour: How could a country barely take care of its own people adequately, yet still spend the bulk of its resources on military hardware and its armed forces?

After leaving Moscow, we flew again on Aeroflot via Omsk to the Siberian city of Irkutsk, near Lake Baikal. This area reminded us of Alaska and the Canadian Yukon, wild and remote. The economy here was based on lumber, mining, metallurgy, fishing, and furs. Special housing offers and salary incentives were given to encourage people to settle here, particularly because the winter climate is so brutal. But because of the more isolated 'frontier spirit,' we noted that the locals seemed to care little about the political dictates from Moscow, several time zones away to the west. People went about their lives and showed minimal enthusiasm for Communism, from what we could tell.

This was also true in the Soviet Central Asian Republics, thousands of miles west and south of Irkutsk. The culture, religion, and racial components there were totally foreign to being anything Russian. All the signs on our visits to Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara were in both Uzbek and Russian, and there was the rare propaganda billboard or Lenin statue, but the people seemed little interested in Communism. Instead, they simply endured it and cleverly worked around it. The locals here were smiling, tanned, and very healthy, due to a favorable summer climate which helped provide abundant fresh fruits and vegetables. Their lively markets were bursting with a huge variety of foodstuffs, assorted meats, and even plentiful bouquets of colorful flowers!

Further west from Central Asia, the Republic of Georgia was similarly doing well. We saw happy and healthy families, colorfully dressed, enjoying a mild, Mediterranean climate with plenty of fresh foods and wine in their capital city, Tbilisi. All signage was in the Georgian language and Russian, but we witnessed very little outward evidence of Moscow's political domination. The culture and religion here were likewise not very Russian at all.

We ended our three-week tour of the U.S.S.R. in Leningrad, a grand, beautifully restored city of canals across the Baltic Sea from Finland. We especially admired the Hermitage art museum (the spectacular former Winter Palace of the czars), St. Isaac's Cathedral (third largest in the world), the Peter and Paul Fortress, and Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main shopping street. Just outside the city was the opulent gold and yellow Summer Palace ("Petrodvorets," a.k.a. "Peterhof") of Peter the Great, the brilliant and imposing Czar who founded the city and had it built to resemble a more European-style capital of Russia, which he named "St. Petersburg." We were back in the realm of many more propaganda posters and billboards and Lenin statues again, but it seemed not as depressing and oppressive as in Moscow -- even though this was where the 1917 Russian Revolution began against the 300-year-old Romanov Dynasty, represented at that time by Czar Nicholas II.

As you are probably aware, the Soviet Union became unsustainable during 1989-1991 and finally collapsed, its Communist system basically abandoned. The U.S.S.R. was split up, and reverted to its former independent republic nations. Sadly today, new freedoms and a more capitalistic economic system have struggled under Russia's long-time leader, Vladimir Putin, who acts more like a corrupt dictator than an enlightened, democratically-elected leader. Black market racketeering, drug cartels, global computer hacking, increased crime, and shocking violence has been much of the sorry aftermath of Communism's departure.

Meanwhile today, both China and Vietnam have successfully adopted a hybrid economic system of 'communistic capitalism,' whereby the State plans and controls all aspects of business, such as manufacturing, international trade, domestic and foreign construction, infrastructure projects, banking, etc. These two countries realized that pure communism isolated them from lucrative global markets, so they reversed their policies and embraced the new 'race towards wealth.' This provided their citizens with both full employment and its essential counterpart -- unfettered consumerism to fuel a rising middle class. Individual incentive was revived, encouraged and rewarded. Yet the Communist leaders cleverly and simultaneously kept control of their own power positions, and thereby forestalled any 'counter-revolutionary tendencies' which an underemployed or restless populace might embrace. The earlier pure Communist ideals of China's Mao Zedong and Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh were thus discarded.

During my visit to ten cities in China with a group of educators in 1982, we saw everyone -- young and old, male and female -- wearing either a navy blue or an olive green 'Mao suit.' There were no colorful Western clothing styles. Bicycles were everywhere, and we saw a few buses but virtually no automobiles (those being reserved for privileged Party officials). However, in 1985, China's then Premier Deng Xiaoping surprised the world when he announced that there was "no fundamental contradiction" between China's system and the market economy -- and so the tsunami of change to Chinese Communism rapidly commenced. When I returned in China in 1987, I was stunned to see the quick transition to unfettered consumerism, and colorful Western clothes and product billboards, with bicycles largely replaced by new cars. Chinese citizens were finally allowed to travel abroad with their new extra incomes, and eager Chinese students could also study in America and Europe, and bring home fresh ideas and exciting technologies which could benefit the homeland. And of course now, the hyper-economic activity of modern China remains a wonder to behold: its cities continually bursting with new construction, its factories ever-expanding, its infrastructure constantly being updated to meet ever growing demand. This accelerated growth was matched in Vietnam as well, where I witnessed -- in 2012 -- Ho Chi Minh City (formally Saigon) looking like a modern, but smaller version of Los Angeles, with one million motorbikes and cars zipping around on a spaghetti maze of freeways, amid a forest of impressive skyscrapers and gleaming office towers.

But Communist Cuba -- under Fidel Castro since 1959 (until his death in 2016), and still now, largely under his brother, Raul -- has yet to attempt a successful hybrid economic model like China and Vietnam. Rationed food lines, crumbling housing and infrastructure, no freedom of speech, beatings and jail for dissenters, government control of the media and the internet, corrupt Party officials, censorship -- all is the daily lot of the suffering Cuban people. The Cuban peso was worthless outside of the country, and American dollars were in hot demand. Like the Russians in 1984, we found the Cubans to be wonderfully warm and welcoming hosts during our ten-day visit there. But, also like the Soviets then, Cubans were not allowed to get a passport -- or could even afford to travel abroad, the average salary being a paltry $20 U.S. equivalent/mo. -- for fears by their governmental officials that they would never return home. What can you say about a political system that doesn't trust its own citizens? With its close proximity to the United States/Florida, however, and all the bustling trade that the two countries could generate together, I feel that someday soon, Cuba will similarly adopt the China and Vietnam hybrid economic models and rejoin the world economy.

Such an inevitable development will leave only the pariah nation of North Korea -- under its eccentric dictator Kim Jong-un -- as the last nation waving the old Red Banner of Communism.

So much for the experiment of Communism: history's tragic -- and ultimately proven flawed and failed -- social/political/economic ideal...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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