

# OP-ED

## Death of communism recalls an idealistic dream that went awry

### THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

What an Elul it's been! Here we are, preparing to transform ourselves as we face a new year, and the world has upstaged us by transforming itself before our eyes.

Who would have thought that we might enter into 5752 greeting the end of communist rule in the Soviet Union? The reality of totalitarian communism has existed throughout my lifetime and throughout most of yours, I'm sure. The change brought about by its demise is just head-spinning.

This is a good time for us to reflect on the role of Jews and perhaps even Judaism in the history of the Communist Party. As we know, there were once a great many Jewish communists both in Eastern Europe and in the United States. Most of the latter "defected" after the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1940 or Stalin's anti-Semitic "Doctor's Plot" of 1953. But a few — some of my own relatives among them! — remained loyal to the party line right through 1967, when they condemned Israel's "imperialist aggression" as provoking the Six-Day War.

That generation of old-time Jewish communists has virtually disappeared, and I dare say they are not much missed.

There is no denying that Jews played a disproportionate and prominent role in the communist movement throughout its history. Some people in Eastern Europe, including some anti-Semites, claim that communism was a Jewish plot foisted upon them by a vengeful minority after the war. That, of course, is nonsense.

It was Josef Stalin, hardly the Jews' friend in the postwar years, who imposed communism on the former satellite countries. But there were surprisingly many Jews among the communist leadership in those countries, as there had been in Russia before the purges.

Part of this can readily be explained. It is well-known that only the Red army was willing to save Jewish lives, both in the terrible pogroms that followed World War I and in the horrors of the Holocaust. Jews hiding in the woods during World War II were well-

advised to make sure the partisans they joined were pro-Soviet rather than nationalists or anti-communists. The latter, often as not, wound up shooting Jews or turning them over to Nazi hands.

It was only natural for Jews in both these circumstances to be grateful to the communists and to be impressed by what seemed like their genuine commitment to ending the old scourge of anti-Semitism in that part of the world. If the "new man" that communism was trying to create would forget the anti-Semitism of his ancestors, Jews could be all for it.

But some Jewish support for communism was, in fact, older and deeper than that. While Karl Marx's own Jewish roots and their influence upon him have been much debated, the circles around Nikolai Lenin and Stalin contained many Jews.

Unfortunately, some of the worst architects of totalitarianism, including Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the secret police, whose statue in Moscow was pulled down last month, and Lazar Kaganovich, who died earlier this summer, were "outs."

How is it possible, we might ask. These were people raised in the age-old tradition of Jewish humanitarianism, one that saw every person as the image of God. These were people who suffered persecution as members of a minority and therefore, by nature, should have treasured the rights of difference and dissent. How could such people have been among the architects of communist totalitarianism?

It all began, of course, with good intentions. These people were raised in a czarist Russia of endless poverty, ignorance and despair. While radically rejecting the religious faith of

Judaism, they perhaps unconsciously held on to some of its deepest values, including a passion for justice and a concern for society's victims. Their Jewish legacy taught them not to turn their backs on suffering.

They also inherited from Judaism an inherent sense of progress, a feeling that this world is capable and worthy of redemption. Jews see the redemptive process as ongoing throughout history, and all of Israel as participating in the effort to bring Messiah. Their messianism may have been fully secularized, but it was not lost. Much of this legacy must have been stored somewhere in the mental baggage of these young revolutionaries who went so far astray.

They may also have inherited from their tradition a sense that smallness is no barrier to doing great things. Jews have always seen themselves as "the smallest among all the nations," yet our tradition promises that our deeds are key to the ultimate drama of redemption.

The young communist was able to transfer this vision from one sort of cabal to another, to understand from his or her Jewish background that a small, tightly organized cell of revolutionaries could transform a whole society.

Now we know how dangerous people of such "good intentions" can be. Though they may have begun as idealists, hoping to redeem the common people from oppression, their idealism soon gave way to a naked and ugly demand for absolute power. They were creating a new and more perfect universe, and nothing or no one would be allowed to stand in their way.

That "no one" turned out to include millions of Ukrainian peasants, thousands of religious Jews and

Zionists, and countless numbers of former communist colleagues who were purged at one point or another for some real or imagined deviation from the "Truth," the most recent party line.

Indeed, there is no one more dangerous than the misguided idealist. Given munitions, the self-righteous anger of such people can lead them to perpetrate the most terrible of acts.

At the same time, many of us have known Jews committed to a socialist vision that has nothing to do with totalitarianism. We think of the Israeli kibbutz as a prime example, or of socialist leaders in other parts of the world who are as far as can be imagined from Stalin and his like.

The breaking point between these two types has to do with the matter of hearing and listening to the other. You may have a great dream of world redemption. You may be absolutely convinced that it is the only way to improve the lot of suffering humanity. But you still have to be able to listen to the other guy who says, "No thank you, I don't want to be redeemed."

When you lose the ability to hear that message and leave him alone, you're liable to step over the line between helping him and using him for your own ends. That is what happened to the communists, Jews and non-Jews alike. It is a message we should all learn as we celebrate the demise of Soviet totalitarianism.

How sad, yet proud, I was to see that one of the three young men who died defying tanks in Moscow last month was Jewish. Ilya Krichevsky and his two Russian compatriots were posthumously declared "Heroes of the Soviet Union." Ilya should be a hero of ours, too. ■

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