

What is Communism? Prague Tries to Explain...

By Abi King | East Europe

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It was the second time I'd stood on the banks of the Vltava River in Prague, watching the Charles Bridge stretch lanterns across the water towards the castle. The stone figures melted in and out of existence through the mist like ghosts and I paused to realise just how far I'd come.

Not just the thousand miles from Istanbul, nor the change in career since I'd last crossed these cobblestones. No, I was thinking about my lessons in European history as I'd travelled back and forth across the former iron curtain.

Prague, like many of the cities along this Iron Route, witnessed much of this history first hand. While spared the intense bombing that scarred Warsaw, London, Dresden and Berlin, they hadn't been spared much else.

The Nazi Occupation of Czechoslovakia took place before the war even began. Not as a result of direct military aggression, nor the result of a democratic alliance, but as a peculiar act of politics.

The Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia was signed over to Nazi Germany by Italy, France and the UK in the name of something it took me a while to recognise.

Appeasement. A crucial part of history we had actually covered in school.

Prague and the Cold War. The Backstory.

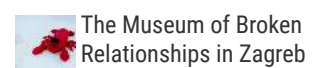
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At the time (in 1938) the horror of World War One was recent enough to make many desperate to avoid another Anglo-German conflict yet distant enough for a new generation of soldiers to have arrived. [The Anschluss between Austria and Germany occurred with unease](#) – but appeared welcome by the people of Austria. A natural redress, perhaps, of the harsh conditions of surrender drawn up at the Treaty of Versailles.

And there were over 3 million Germans living in the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia after all. And Hitler had promised that after Sudetenland, he would stop. He really would. He just wanted one more piece of fragmented Germany back where it belonged and then all would be well with the world again.

This (somewhat simplified) version of events led to what must be one of the most embarrassing political moments on record: Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, brandishing a piece of paper in triumph and declaring that he had negotiated “peace for our time.”

Within months, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia and then Poland and within the year the world was once more at war.

It's a short and fairly easy walk from the iconic Karluv Most Bridge to Wenceslas Square and only a little further to the golden arches of McDonalds.

Upstairs and across from the casino is Prague's museum of communism.

Prague's Museum of Communism

As I passed the Russian Doll with fangs, I realised how seldom I'd heard the ideas behind communism discussed. In the States, the C word seemed unutterable. In Budapest, it stood as a codeword for terror. At home, a plot device for spy thrillers and only in Cuba had I seen its merits explained.


Prague's Museum of Communism stands out from the crowd – by actually talking about communism. For a little while at least, before moving on to how things went wrong.


This made interesting background thinking in the quaint cobbled streets of Prague but by the time I left Berlin these interpretations had changed the way I saw the world.

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

What is Communism? Let's Start with Karl Marx

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The truth is (as is usually the case) that several different people came up with the “idea” of communism, although Karl Marx usually gets the sound bite.

This German theologian claimed that the driving force for all of history was the struggle between the classes. Usually, this struggle took place between the current elite and a new elite, two small groups wrestling for power.

After the industrial revolution, Marx felt that history would move on to a different but logical step. For the first time, the larger, exploited working class would overthrow the ruling elite. This socialist revolution would create a political system dominated by the majority, not the minority as in the past. (And present, of course, with the “1% protests” outside Wall Street.)

We all have a lifetime of words and actions and none of us know which, if any, will have any lasting effect. Given the events of the 20th century, a few of Marx’s points seem particularly poignant:

- 1) Marx wasn’t clear about what would happen after the socialist revolution. He theorised that eventually there would be no politics and no need for a state but that in the meantime a temporary dictatorship would be necessary. If ever a man needed to expand on a two word idea, it was Karl Marx and the words temporary dictatorship.
- 2) Marx remained convinced that only advanced industrial societies could have socialist revolutions; that communism could not and would not work in impoverished agricultural societies simply because history had to follow its logical steps.
- 3) Communism could not work in one country alone: it needed an international approach.

Putting the plan into action: Lenin

Fast forward to a boy born in the late 19th century whose brother was arrested and executed as a teenager for an alleged plot against the Russian Tsar. This boy becomes the leader of the Bolsheviks who overthrow their monarchy in 1917 and usher in more than seven decades of communism in Moscow.

Lenin wasn’t a theologian; he was a party leader who needed to get things done. And thus, he added a few more factors into Marx’s mix:

- 1) He argued that **some people are more politically aware than others** and should assume responsibility for leading society to socialism.
- 2) For practical reasons, a degree of secrecy would be required.
- 3) He glossed over Marx’s belief that only advanced industrial nations were ready for communism, as Russia itself was still predominantly an agricultural

country.

Russia, Lenin argued, was the weak link in the chain of powerful capitalist countries. Break the chain here and international capitalism would collapse. Russia would then be absorbed into the new international socialist orbit by countries who *were* sufficiently developed, such as Britain, France and Germany at the time.

And Then, Stalin



Often depicted as the face of communism, it was Stalin who largely spearheaded the formation of the Soviet Bloc.

He was Lenin's rather controversial successor as the head of the Bolsheviks, a man promoted because he appeared more moderate and stable than his main competitor Trotsky.

It's another one of those historical moments that shriek out from the page like a bloodied exclamation mark.

Stalin, as it transpired, was not particularly moderate. He was a driven man who left a complex legacy.

His armies freed prisoners from the Nazi concentration camps before themselves constructing monstrous gulags. His policies transformed Russia into a superpower with nuclear capabilities yet left millions dying of starvation.

His paranoia and ruthlessness became a prominent feature of communism as it spread worldwide.

Stalin signed deals with Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill and was once nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Little of that appears in the Prague museum, privately curated by an American businessman.

Here, Marx, Lenin and Stalin are held to account for the deaths of more than 100 million people across the world.

Here, Marx, Lenin and Stalin are held to account for the deaths of more than 100 million people across the world.

It's a powerful statement, despite its flaws.

The Prague Museum of Communism

With that as a backdrop, the museum shows us everyday life in communist Czechoslovakia, from the run-down shops with little to no food to the scarlet stars that young children wore. We see anti-American propaganda and the development of the Socialist Realism art movement.

The museum promises a trip through the *Dream, The Reality and the Nightmare* of communism and it's to its great credit that it spends time on the first two.

The final section recreates the bare-bulbed interrogation desk reminiscent of the [House of Terror in Budapest](#). But whereas that museum faded away after the Stalin years, Prague just keeps on going.

It talks about the Prague Spring in 1968, when the more moderate socialist leader in Czechoslovakia tried to ease restrictions. The Soviets responded by invading once more.

And then it screams and shrieks its way through the Velvet Revolution, with colour TV footage of the protests on Wenceslas Square. The year when the Soviet Union crumbled and the iron curtain fell.

I still can't understand why. Why the difference? Why the militant repression in the 1960s, yet the almost defeatist disintegration in 1989?

It's late and already past closing time. The women who are working here tonight are already being kind by letting me stay.

I grab a few last snapshots of new upon old memories: of high-waisted jeans and bubble gum perms intermingled with police brutality on Wenceslas Square.

They're still in my mind as I head back to the bridge, back to the hotel and past Wenceslas Square.

Today, the bloodied and beaten bodies that screamed on these streets are replaced by Christmas Markets and the sweet smell of cinnamon. It's a disorienting experience.

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And after Prague, there's only one more stop left on the Iron Route: Berlin itself, the city that symbolises the Cold War.

I take the cable car up to the hotel, watching the modern city of Prague spread out beneath muffled Christmas lights.

I'm still thinking about the Museum of Communism, but I'm also thinking of something else. A man I met at the border between Austria and Hungary. An eyewitness on the day when the iron curtain was first breached...



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communist museum prague	0	3	68.67 / 0.00
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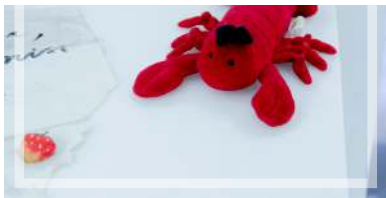


About the Author

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The Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb



Croatia's Elaphiti Islands: From Dubrovnik to the Wild



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