

# The New Criterion

Dispatch August 21, 2018 05:42 pm

## Socialism as a hate crime

by James Piereson

*A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.*

—Joseph Stalin

It is a great irony that at a time when Facebook and Twitter are closing accounts of conservatives for allegedly promoting “hate,” and conservative speakers are banned from college campuses for (as it is charged) “peddling hate,” opinion polls suggest that socialism is more popular than ever among college students and in progressive precincts of the Democratic Party. Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed socialist, is the most popular figure among progressive Democrats, while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has emerged from the Bronx as the newest socialist celebrity and is traveling the country singing the virtues of socialism, as if no one has heard those songs before.

Which raises the question: given our loose standards on the subject, why isn’t socialism a “hate crime”?

After all, the evidence for its malignant effects is obvious to anyone with sufficient curiosity to look at the historical record. The socialist movement has been responsible for the murder, imprisonment, and torture of many millions, and perhaps hundreds of millions, of innocent people during its heyday in the twentieth century. That history of murder and tyranny continues on a smaller scale today in the handful of countries living under the misfortune of socialism—for example, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and (more recently) Venezuela.

How do socialists escape the indictment that, in view of the historical record, they are purveyors of tyranny and mass murder? Many deny that Stalin, Mao, and the others were true socialists and, indeed, that socialism has never really been tried—a manifest absurdity. Senator Sanders and others claim that they are for something called “democratic socialism,” a popular and peaceful version of the doctrine, but that’s what Lenin, Mao, and Castro said until they seized power and immediately began to sing a different tune. Democracy and diversity are what they say when out of power; tyranny and authoritarianism are what they practice once in power. That is the tried-and-true technique of all socialist movements.

The late R. J. Rummel, a noted scholar of political violence and totalitarian movements, coined the term “democide” to describe large-scale government killings for political purposes—in other words, politically motivated murder. While communists and socialists have not had a monopoly on democide, these movements (Rummel says) have been responsible for far more political killings in the modern era than any other political movement or form of government.

He concludes that

“[i]n sum the communists probably have murdered something like 110 million, or near two-thirds of all those killed by all governments, quasi-governments, and guerrillas from 1900 to 1987. Of course the total itself is shocking. It is several times the thirty-eight million battle-dead that have been killed in all this century’s international and domestic wars. Yet the probable number of murders by the Soviet Union alone—one communist country—well surpasses this cost of war.”

Rummel suspects that the estimate of one hundred ten million killed may be too low, and in fact that the death toll from socialist democide in the twentieth century may be as high as 260 million.

## II.

Below is a breakdown of the bloody record:

1. The Soviet Union (ussr), commencing with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, was the first large-scale experiment in socialism. For those who like to think that there is a meaningful distinction between communism and socialism, it should be noted that ussr stands for the Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics. Whatever Lenin and Stalin thought they were doing, they agreed they were engaged in a *socialist* enterprise.

Rummel writes that “the Soviet Union appears the greatest mega-murderer of all, apparently killing near sixty-one million people,” with Stalin being directly responsible for at least forty-three million of these deaths, mostly via forced labor camps and government-induced famines.

Stalin’s government killed between seven and eleven million people in 1932 and 1933, in what has come to be known as the “terror famine.” Most of them were Ukrainian peasants who resisted collectivization or failed to meet mandated production quotas. Several distinguished historians have documented this catastrophe. Robert Conquest, in *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), estimated that

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eleven million people died of starvation or outright murder in European sections of the Soviet Union from 1932 to 1934. Anne Applebaum, in her book *The Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (2017), largely agrees with Conquest's estimate and shows that these deaths arose as a consequence of deliberate Soviet policy.

A few years later, between 1936 and 1938, Stalin orchestrated a campaign of repression and terror that, again according to Robert Conquest (*The Great Terror*, 1968), led to the execution and/or murder of some seven hundred thousand people judged to be opponents of the socialist regime. Many of those killed were leaders of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution whom Stalin came to regard as traitors or rivals for power. Some judge the toll in Stalin's terror to have been greater than one million killed.

At the time, and for decades thereafter, Western Soviet apologists denied that killings on this scale had occurred or, if they did, were justified in order to maintain the regime. It was only in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev admitted to Stalin's crimes, that Western apologists reluctantly acknowledged that they may have taken place.

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Rummel estimates that Stalin's regime killed another thirteen million people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (mostly in Poland) during World War II.

Adding up all of these estimates, he concludes that some forty-three million people were murdered under Stalin's regime, and he calculates that the total number of

political killings in the Soviet Union under Lenin, Stalin, and their successors probably reaches as high as sixty-one million.

2. Then there is the awkward example of Nazism in Germany (1933–45), which most agree was an unrivaled example of horror and mass murder (except perhaps in comparison to Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China). Rummel does not include Nazi Germany in his calculations of socialist democide. This may be judged an oversight on his part, because Nazism was in fact a socialist movement. The term "Nazi" was shorthand for Hitler's political party, the nsdap, initials that stood for the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Hitler and his henchmen were socialists, albeit of a somewhat different stripe than Lenin and Stalin.

Scholars have attempted to catalogue the scale of Nazi murder, but it has proven difficult to do because of the immensity of the enterprise and the stretch of the Nazi campaign across nearly the whole of the European continent over a period of twelve years. Rummel (cited above), whose estimates approximate those of other scholars, concludes that the Nazis killed perhaps twenty-one million people via outright murder in Germany, France, Poland, and the Soviet Union, including

six million Jews murdered in concentration camps and others who perished by Nazi institutional practices such as forced labor, “euthanasia,” forced suicides, medical experimentation, and treatment of prisoners of war. That estimate does not count millions of mass casualties in the European war launched by Hitler, nor does it include the deaths of as many as 1.9 million ethnic Germans when they were expelled from Eastern European territories (mostly Poland) between 1945 and 1950, according to Rummel’s estimates.

3. Following the communist revolution in China in 1948, Mao Zedong launched a series of campaigns that put him in a league with Stalin and Hitler in terms of the numbers of people murdered, tortured, and imprisoned.

In the first phase of the revolution, from 1948 to 1951, Mao sought to destroy the property-owning class by killing at least one landlord in every village via public execution. One of Mao’s deputies said in 1948 that as many as thirty million “landlords” would have to be eliminated. Hundreds of thousands were shot, buried alive, dismembered, and otherwise tortured to death in the early years of the regime. Mao and his comrades killed perhaps 4.5 million Chinese during this period, according to estimates compiled by Rummel and verified by other scholars. And that figure may actually be on the low end.

Mao, alas, was just getting started in his campaigns of terror and murder. During the 1950s, the Chinese communists carried out murder campaigns against Christians and other undesirables, causing the deaths of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, of innocent people.

In the so-called Great Leap Forward (1958–62), a misnomer if there ever was one, Mao accelerated his campaign for collectivization and industrialization, emulating as best he could Stalin’s collectivist campaign of the 1930s, with eerily similar results. Frank Dikotter’s carefully researched book *Mao’s Great Famine* (2010), places the number of Chinese killed via murder, torture, starvation, imprisonment, and other causes at a staggering forty-five million over that four-year period. In *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–62* (2012), the journalist Yang Jisheng (using government sources) places the number of “unnatural” deaths at thirty-six million, as communist officials seized land and produce from peasants to redistribute elsewhere and systematically killed all who resisted or stood in the way of the regime’s collectivist policy. Some have referred to this episode as the single greatest mass murder in recorded history.

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In 1966 Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, designed to purify the communist ideology in China by purging capitalist and remnants of traditional belief across the country. This is the stock response

among socialists when confronted with the failure of their schemes to live up to theoretical promises: counter-revolutionary elements are to blame. The brutal campaign of state-sponsored murder, torture, and persecution went on for a full decade through different phases of insanity, finally ending with Mao's death in 1976. Merrill Goldman, a noted scholar of modern China, estimates that as many as one hundred million people were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, and between five and ten million people were killed via executions, communal massacres, and starvation. Rummel places the death total at 7.7 million, in the middle range of the above estimate.

The Chinese government today is understandably embarrassed by this barbaric episode in its recent history and has held back records that would allow scholars to arrive at a more exact estimate of the numbers killed, injured, and persecuted.

Over a period of just three decades, Mao's socialist government was responsible for the killing of some fifty to sixty million Chinese, most of those casualties being incurred in three brutal episodes of political cleansing and socialist "reform."

These three communist dictators—Stalin, Hitler, and Mao—were thus responsible for the murders of well over one hundred million people between the years 1930 and 1976. In the Hall of Fame of socialism, these three occupy exalted platforms.

### III.

Moving along to some of the lesser episodes in the bloody history of communism:

1. Vietnam represents a difficult case; it is difficult to disentangle outright political murders from those killed in the military and revolutionary conflict that engulfed the country more or less continuously from 1945 to 1975. Rummel estimates that around four million Vietnamese lost their lives in these struggles, about 10 percent of the total population. Of this number, he estimates that 1.8 million were murdered as victims of democide. The communist government of North Vietnam (which, after 1975, was the whole of Vietnam) was responsible for the overwhelming proportion of these deaths, nearly 1.7 million of the 1.8 million killed via assassination, execution, forced labor, starvation, and communal massacres. Rummel attributes most of the other deaths—one hundred thousand or so—to the government of South Vietnam. The stark fact remains that in a long conflict between the two sides, communists committed more than 90 percent of the political killings.

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2. In Cuba, Rummel estimates that Castro's government killed at least seventy-three thousand people for political reasons, and perhaps as many as 140 thousand, in a country with a population of eleven million today but just six million when Castro seized power in 1958. Castro staged hundreds of public executions after he seized power, imprisoned thousands of opponents and suspected opponents, and seized property from landowners and foreign corporations. Compared to his communist brethren, Castro appears almost humane in terms of the scale of his killings, apparently limiting them to real as opposed to imaginary adversaries—though in reaching this conclusion one must leave to one side Castro's wish to launch a nuclear attack against the United States in 1962 in retaliation for the American demand for the removal of offensive nuclear weapons from the island. Like other socialists, Castro was ever ready to consider extreme measures.

3. In Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime under the leadership of Pol Pot murdered some two million people in a country of seven million souls, according to estimates compiled by Rummel and verified by other scholars. A war crimes tribunal set up in 2001 by a successor government in Cambodia also verified these estimates. In this remarkable campaign, Pol Pot and his comrades sought to follow the socialist example set by Mao—that is, to purge the socialist movement of impure elements, which resulted in the massacre of religious and national minorities, intellectuals, and those living in cities. Hundreds of thousands of victims were murdered in the so-called “killing fields” of Cambodia, various sites across the country where Khmer Rouge soldiers and officials carried out executions and buried victims in mass graves. This slaughter ranks near the top of the list of socialist atrocities in terms of the proportion of the population killed—two million killed out of a population of seven million.

4. North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea) must be judged as the most bizarre of all socialist states, which is saying something in view of the standard established by the regimes listed above. The fact that it is a large-scale prison camp with a regimented population does not make it much different from other notable socialist regimes. The fact that it is a dynastic government run by the Kim dynasty (now in its third generation of rule) with the family succession written into the fundamental law of the country is the main justification for the “bizarre” or “Orwellian” label it has attained.

Rummel estimates that between seven hundred thousand and 3.5 million people have been murdered in the North Korean democide, with a reasonable midpoint being around 1.6 million. It is difficult to quantify the victims, he writes, because North Korea is a closed society that guards its documents and denies outsiders any information about murders, executions, torture, and the like. Rummel writes that the great proportion of those killed by the regime died in prison camps from forced labor, starvation, and illness.

During the Korean War, Rummel writes, communist officials followed North Korean troops as they advanced into South Korea and systematically massacred South Korean government officials, former officials, and anti-communists. They then repeated these massacres as North Korean troops retreated back through South Korea to the North. In addition, the regime impressed some four

hundred thousand South Koreans into their army, a large proportion of whom died from being forced into the most dangerous or laborious assignments. North Korea also failed to account for many thousands of American prisoners of war.

Adding up all of the calculations, Rummel approximates that the North Korean democide has claimed so far between one and two million victims (in a country of twenty-five million people).

5. The contemporary case of Venezuela is different from other experiments in socialism because it is not implicated in mass murder or democide, at least to the extent catalogued above, or at least not yet. The Venezuelan case is rather one of *economic* collapse, social chaos, and mass suffering due to the inevitable effects of socialist policies.

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In Venezuela, socialists did not seize power by violent revolution, but were instead elected initially by the voters, somewhat in the manner of Hitler's accession to power. In socialist regimes elsewhere, the kind of economic failure now taking place in Venezuela has provoked repression, extra-legal decrees, the elimination of legal

protections, and large-scale murder. Legal and constitutional protections are evaporating in Venezuela at a rapid pace, but the regime there has not yet resorted to large-scale killings, perhaps because with the civilized world watching it has decided that mass murder is no longer a practical option. That represents progress of a certain kind.

Venezuela was among the more prosperous of South American countries for most of the twentieth century, owing to a diversified economy and, more recently, to abundant oil reserves that allowed the country to accumulate export surpluses. That circumstance promoted a higher standard of living in the country, though it also drew more labor and capital into the oil industry and put the country's economy at the mercy of the ebb and flow of international oil prices. When Hugo Chavez won the presidency in 1998, he moved quickly to nationalize the oil industry, raise taxes on corporations, and redistribute land and income across the population. He also supported a revised constitution for the country, giving the president a longer term and more power and granting new social and democratic rights to the population.

Rising oil prices in the early years of the regime allowed Chavez to increase social spending and distribute funds to constituent groups, even as foreigners and foreign corporations began to withdraw capital from the country. Since socialists do not believe in the price system, Chavez had little understanding that oil prices could go down as well as up. In the event, oil prices collapsed in the Great Recession of 2008, leading to inflation, collapse of the currency, capital flight, and general economic chaos and mass suffering—all inevitable consequences of socialist policies.

In response to protests and mounting opposition, the socialist government has (predictably) cracked down on critics. In 2013, Nicolás Maduro, the successor to Chavez following his death, requested the passing of a law to permit him to rule by decree. The next year he created the “Ministry of Supreme Social Happiness” to coordinate government social programs.

The measures have not “worked,” if by that term we mean a return to prosperity and stability, and of course they are never going to “work,” socialism being a doctrine of power rather than one of workable economics. Venezuela is now experiencing a many-sided crisis of economics, mass suffering, and democracy. Some say that Venezuelan voters chose this course when they elected Chavez, and so they deserve to reap the consequences they have sown. Whether or not this is so, perhaps there is some value in letting the suffering in Venezuela run its course so that the obvious lesson from that experience will finally sink in for others vulnerable to the socialist temptation. One of our television networks would perform a public service by documenting chapter and verse how this latest socialist catastrophe was staged.

#### IV.

The question is often asked: why does the same thing happen over and over in socialist regimes? Socialist plans and policies—five-year plans repeated again and again, collectivization of agriculture, nationalization of industry, the concentration of power into the hands of a few—lead inevitably to economic collapse, repression, large-scale killing, and democide. It has happened according to script wherever socialism has been tried. Socialism always and everywhere begins with humanistic promises and ends in barbarism.

F. A. Hayek answered this question as long ago as 1944, when he published *The Road to Serfdom*, his classic critique of socialism. At that time, the socialist experiment was still in its early stages, with just two examples from which to draw lessons: the communist regime in Russia and Hitler’s Nazi regime in Germany. The brutal history of socialism was yet fully to play out in the post-war era, but the lessons Hayek drew from Stalin and Hitler would turn out to apply perfectly to Mao, Castro, the Kim dynasty, and all of the socialist tyrants who came later.

In socialist movements, as Hayek pointed out, there is a tendency for the most brutal and unscrupulous people to rise to the top because they are the types who are willing to take the necessary steps to seize power and who prize the kind of absolute power that socialism promises. Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot—these were not the kinds of people one might have encountered in faculty lounges or middle-class town meetings. They were blackguards and thugs one and all, thuggishness being the key attribute for rising to the top in a movement in which power went to those willing to experiment with the most extreme measures.



Socialist policies, moreover, are always going to fail because it is impossible for central planners efficiently to allocate capital, goods, and services across a large economy.

Socialism, after all, was always a political doctrine and never a plausible economic

theory. When there arose shortages of food or housing or military equipment—when socialist policies failed—leaders were faced with a choice of admitting failure and abandoning the socialist path or doubling down on their policies and preserving their power. It was in their nature to choose the latter course, and thus to press forward with more extreme measures, which typically involved the identification of scapegoats and counter-revolutionary elements as causes of failure. From here it was but a few steps to the catastrophic outcomes described above: show trials, terror famines, mass starvation, cultural revolutions, “killing fields,” and democide.

To return to the question posed at the beginning: is socialism a hate crime? The record speaks for itself: socialism is a hate crime, a doctrine of tyranny, mass murder, and human suffering on a vast scale. What should be done about it is a different matter. The important thing is to identify the crime.

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