

Remarks at the Annual 1956 Commemoration

Hungarian House, Wallingford, CT

Sunday, October 22, 2017

"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. It has to be fought for and defended by each generation." --- Ronald Reagan

It's always an honor to be invited to speak at the 1956 commemoration here. It's a time to pay our respects to the freedom fighters, remember those who were lost, and reflect on what they were fighting against and what they were fighting for.

1956 was not merely a Hungarian revolt. It was not merely a brief parting in the clouds of totalitarianism that had enshrouded a single country. It gave hope to millions that they too could throw off their oppressors and true hope is the death knell of all oppressive regimes.

That freedom fight in Hungary sent ripples throughout the Soviet Union and the world. It was the first chip at the façade of the communist regime. It inspired others to revolt over the years in the Prague, in Warsaw, and eventually in Temesvár as the regime eventually collapsed.

It should remind us that freedom is indeed something we often have to fight for. It is something many people have fought-and-died for throughout history and we should not take it for granted ourselves.

When I stop and reflect on it, it's actually quite amazing to me that I am standing in a free country talking with Hungarians about an anti-communist, pro-freedom event that occurred over 50 years ago. And that event helped put the Soviet-Communist Regime on the slippery slope that led to its complete collapse in 1989/90, now more than 25 years ago. The university students I teach were not even born by 1990. That period for them is something they only read about in books or see on History Channel documentaries or more probably on YouTube. In any case, the Soviet Union has indeed fallen and been left on the "ash heap of history". And that is a good thing.

But as we look back on history and pass these lessons on to the next generations, we need to reflect on what we've learned. And this year, my mind is on the whole of the communist experiment in the world. In a few weeks I'll travel to Washington D.C. for the Victims of Communist Foundations events around the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

Like the Hungarian revolution for freedom, the 1917 Russian revolution was also a violent October – November revolution, albeit of a very different kind. But it struck me as poetic – and enjoyably ironic – that today in October 2017 we stand up to respect the Hungarian freedom fight against communist oppression. In one month we remember its statist birth, its first revolt and of course celebrate its eventual collapse, which also incidentally occurred in October-November of 1989 when the Berlin wall was opened.

While it is well to remember these things and celebrate that the Soviet empire is gone, the ideology of communism that built that “evil empire” is not.

It lives on physically in places like North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cuba and sadly still China, which may even be re-communizing and strengthening its totalitarian regime as we speak. It lives on in radical ideologies on both the far right and far left of the political spectrums. While a talk on ideology and political and economic theory is beyond my scope today, I would like to take a minute to recall the human devastation of communism, a topic that fits with our 1956 theme today.

In Hungary alone, approximately 2,500 Hungarians died in the '56 revolution itself. About 200,000 fled the country ... and we are of course grateful that many of them came to the United States. Thousands were arrested and sent to the Hungarian gulag where unknown numbers died and hundreds were executed.

While Hungary left its darkest communist days behind in 1956, the human casualties continued under the Kádár albeit more modestly. The death toll in Romania grew and Ceasescu's dictatorship only reached its horrific peaks in the late 1970s and the '80s. Looking at Hungary and its neighbors alone, it's been estimated that 1 million people were killed by Central and Eastern European communist regimes.

What the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution reminds us though is that the nightmare started well before it engulfed the post-WWII world. There were approximately 800,000 prisoners killed under Stalin around 1.7 million further deaths in the Gulags and some 390,000 deaths during ... forced resettlement. That's a total of about 3 million officially recorded under Stalin's direction alone!¹

The estimates of non-combatants killed by the Soviet Union under Stalin, the by China under Mao, and by Cambodia under Rouge range from 21 to 70 million.² Add to that another 2 million in North Korea, then those in Cuba and so on and estimates run up to 95 million people killed by Communist regimes over this past 100 years since the White Revolution of 1917.³

This is the inevitable result when freedom is lost. It is real and it is tragic.

As Ronald Reagan reminded us *"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. It has to be fought for and defended by each generation."*

So, as we remember those who fought in 1956 in Hungary and as we appropriately recognize the great things they did and the losses they and their families suffered let's also take a moment to pray for those still trapped in the darkness of communist regimes today. And pray for us to have the strength to be inspired by 1956 even now so that we continue to fight for freedom both at home and around the world. Let us too stand by the sides of today's freedom fighters so that the death tolls of this evil ideology stop rising and so that one day their children too will have the privilege to live in a free country where communism is only a memory that they can afford to think about only once a year when they gather like us to remember darker days now long gone.

Thank you.

Chris Ball

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¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_killings_under_Communist_regimes

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_killings_under_Communist_regimes

³ Special thanks to Márton Benedek Kovács and Aleksandra Wójcik who helped compile the data on the number of deaths under communist regimes around the world.