

SURVIVORS OF SOCIALISM CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK CRITICALLY

First in a series of interviews.

"What stays in my mind about Arkansas are the wide-open spaces. It was my first long-distance drive west of the Mississippi in a car. Some people think this type of drive is boring but to me it was very meaningful. There was something very special about the big road and the open spaces of Arkansas."

Dr. Andrei Znamenski describing his first visit to Little Rock.

(1Q-2022) A recent development in U.S. mass media is the idea that socialism is popular among American youth. These youth groups include Millennials (1) and Zoomers (2). Examples include media from polls conducted by Gallup (3) and YouGov (4)(2019) and Axios and Momentive (5)(2021). The idea has been publicized in media ranging from the *New York Times* (6) to *Teen Vogue* (7).

French Premier Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) is said to have observed: "Not to be a socialist at 20 is proof of want of heart; to be one at 30 is proof of want of head." Yet there are important dimensions of socialism rarely examined by media. These include the observations of American immigrants who survived socialist regimes, and the idea that socialism is a secular creed.

Dr. Andrei Znamenski is uniquely qualified to discuss these ideas. A native of Samara--a closed city in the former Soviet Union--he is a professor of history at the Univ. of Memphis. Znamenski is the author of a new book, *Socialism as a Secular Creed: A Modern Global History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).(8) The work explores "the fate of the sacred in the age of modernity, when declining traditional religions became replaced or complemented by secular ideologies or what some scholars call political religions."

The Arkansas Policy Foundation (APF) recently interviewed Dr. Znamenski.

APF: Please describe life growing up in the Soviet Union.

Andrei Znamenski (AZ): I grew up in Kuybyshev (Soviet name, 1935-1991, now Samara), the largest city in Samara Oblast. (Note: An *oblast* is a type of administrative region). Kuybyshev was a closed city on the Volga River because of production of Soviet military and space goods.(9) The authorities used to jam foreign radio transmissions, which, of course as youth we wanted to listen because it was forbidden. In the mid-1980s I started teaching in the U.S.S.R. In the late 1980s, I was at St. Petersburg Pedagogical Institute which was very different than my hometown because it was close to the western border and open to foreigners. We were told don't read this book or that book. But of course as students we wanted to read them because they were forbidden. This is where I first heard about Hayek (1899-1992). (10) Hayek said that socialism wouldn't work due to the lack of a price system.

That's how we were gradually demolishing the system in the Soviet Union: reading forbidden books and listening to foreign radio.

APF: How did you come to live in the United States?

AZ: I came to the U.S. in 1993, and earned my Ph.D. at the University of Toledo in Ohio. My dissertation was on Russian Orthodox and Native Americans in Alaska. I defended my dissertation and was hired in 1997 at Alabama State University, a historically black college. I taught there for 12 years and then moved to the University of Memphis, where, because of a smaller teaching load I have more time for reading and writing books.

I'm more concerned at this point in discussing ideas through my books.

APF: How has growing up in the Soviet Union informed your teaching style?

AZ: One develops certain traits to survive. People learn how to read between the lines when living under such a system. One learns to not directly criticize but to use indirect example to make a point. I provide my students with examples from Soviet history. I've shown them pictures of people standing in line waiting for hours to buy food. Why? The Soviet government was trying to regulate the market. Lockdowns in the U.S. are similar. Government tries to regulate supply chains and causes shortages.

Another example would be the suppression of local history when it should be taught by region. In such a system, history books are the same and imposed on every region. Imagine not learning Arkansas history in an Arkansas school.

APF: Please elaborate on the issue of economic shortages.

AZ: We'll always have disruption of consumer goods when the government tries to regulate the economy. In the Soviet Union, there were shortages of food, shoes, any other basic items. You couldn't just go out and buy a box of chocolate candies, good-looking clothing or a car. To get a car you'd have to be big shot in the party or wait 10 years. In the U.S., consumer goods shortages are the result of government intervention.

APF: Please explain the appeal of socialism to some American youth.

AZ: One of the reasons I teach is to work with young people to show them that socialism is essentially wrong as an idea. Sometimes they think socialism is 'cool.' It's counter-cultural. No, it's not countercultural. There is an attempt by certain institutions in our society to mainstream it. Young people want to be different. They want to challenge. But socialism is more of a fad that is based on a misplaced sense of justice and envy. Socialists have jumped from the Soviet Union to China to Cuba and Venezuela. The socialists will say it's different each time but it's not. Each time socialism fails to deliver goods. I ask, 'So when are you going to stop?' I tell students, 'See for yourself. Be critical. Think critically. Read and verify.'

APF: Please explain the idea of socialism as a secular religion.

AZ: Socialism emerged to fill a void created by secularization and reduced religious influence in Europe in the early 1800s. Originally viewed as a religious movement, it later began to masquerade as science. Key figures were Robert Owen (1771-1858) and (Henri de) Saint-Simon (1760-1825).

APF: Please explain an often-overlooked dispute amongst U.S. socialists.

AZ: The big argument on the left is between traditional Marxists emphasizing class and cultural Marxists focused on identity. The traditionalists couldn't win at economics so the mainstream socialist collective shifted to culture. Cultural Marxists are now calling the shots, whereas the old-style Marxists have been marginalized.

Notes

- (1) Generation Y members were born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s.
- (2) Generation Z members were born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s.
- (3) Socialism as Popular as Capitalism Among Young Adults in U.S. (gallup.com)
- (4) Young Americans are increasingly embracing socialism over capitalism (axios.com)
- (5) Axios|Momentive Poll: Capitalism and Socialism (surveymonkey.com)
- (6) "Why Some Young Voters Are Choosing Democratic Socialism Over the Democratic Party" (nytimes.com)
- (7) "The Democratic Socialists of America Can Mobilize Gen Z'ers Like Me" | Teen Vogue
- (8) Andrei Znamenski - Department of History - The University of Memphis
- (9) Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (1934-1968) was the first man to travel to outer space. The Vostok class rocket that took Gagarin to space was built in Kuybyshev.
- (10) Friedrich A. Hayek shared the 1974 Nobel Prize in Economics and taught at the Univ. of Arkansas for a short time in the 1950s.