

**Lex Fridman Podcast #444 - Vejas Liulevicius: Communism, Marxism, Nazism, Stalin,  
Mao, and Hitler**

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**Lex Fridman**

The following is a conversation with Vejas Liulevicius, a historian specializing in Germany and Eastern Europe. He has lectured extensively on the rise, the reign, and the fall of communism. Our discussion goes deep on this, the very heaviest of topics, the communist ideology that has led to over 100 million deaths in the 20th century. We also discuss Hitler, Nazi ideology, and World War II. This is the Lex Fridman Podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Vejas Liulevicius. Let's start with Karl Marx. What were the central ideas of Marx that lay the foundation of communism?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I think there were several key ideas that Marx deployed that were destined to have such an impact, and in some ways they were actually kind of contradictory. On the one hand, Marx insisted that history has a purpose. That history is not just random events, but that rather it's history, we might say, with a capital H, history moving in a deliberate direction, history having a goal, a direction that it was predestined to move in. At the same time, in the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels also suggested that there was a role for special individuals who might even if history was still moving in this predetermined direction, might give it an extra push, might play a heroic role in that process. And I think that these two ideas added together, the notion that there is a science of revolution that suggests that you can move in a deliberate and meaningful, rational way towards the end of history and the resolution of all conflicts, a total liberation of the human person and that moreover that was inevitable, that that was pre-programmed and destined in the order of things, when you add to that the notion that there's also room for heroism and the individual role, this ended up being tremendously powerful as a combination. Earlier thinkers who were socialists had already dreamt of or projected futures where all conflict would be resolved and human life would achieve some sort of perfection. Marx added these other elements that made it far more powerful than the earlier versions that he decried as merely utopian socialism.

**Lex Fridman**

So there's a million questions I could ask there. So on the utopian side. So there is a utopian component to the way he tried to conceive of his ideas.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, first of all, one has to stress, Marx would've gotten extremely upset at this point in the conversation because to call someone a utopian was precisely to argue that you're not scientific, you're not rational, you are not laying out the iron laws of history. You're merely hoping for the best. And that might be laudable, but it was fundamentally unrealistic. That said, hidden among Marx's insistence that there are laws and structures as history moves through class conflict, modes of production towards its ultimate goal of a comprehensive final revolution that will see all exploitation overthrown and people finally

being freed from necessity, smuggled in among those things are most definitely utopian elements. And there, they come especially at the end in which Marx sketches the notion of what things will look like after the revolution has resolved all problems. There, vagueness sets in. It's clear that it's a blessed state that's being talked about. People no longer exploiting one another, people no longer subject to necessity or poverty, but instead enjoying all of the productivity of industrialization that hitherto had been put to private profit now collectively owned and deployed. The notion that one will be able to work at one job in the morning and then engage in leisure activity at yet another fulfilling job in the afternoon. All of this free of any contradictions, free of necessity, free of the ordinary irritations that we experience in our the ordinary lives, that's deeply utopian. The difference was that Marx charted a route towards that outcome that presented itself as cutting-edge science and moreover having the full credibility that science commanded so much, especially in the 19th and early 20th century.

### **Lex Fridman**

So there is a long journey from capitalism to communism that includes a lot of problems. He thought once you resolve the problems, all the complexities of human interactions, the friction, the problems will be gone.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

To the extent that they were based on inequalities and on man's exploitation of man, the result was supposed to be a resolution of all of this. And inevitably, when you talk about the history of communism, you have to include the fact that this often tragic and dramatic history produced a lot of jokes. Jokes that were in part reactions sometimes to the ideological claims made by people like Marx. And one of the famous jokes was that what's the difference between capitalism and communism? And the joke's answer was capitalism is the exploitation of man by man and communism is the exact opposite.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah, you actually have electron humor. I love it. And you deliver in such a dry, beautiful way. Okay, there's again, a million questions. So you outline a set of contradictions, but it's interesting to talk about his view. For example, what was Marx's view of history?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Marx had been a student of Hegel. And Hegel as a German idealist philosopher had announced very definitively that history has a purpose. History is not a collection of random facts. And as an idealist, he proposed that the true movement of history, the true meaning of history, what made history, history with a capital H, something that's transcendent and meaningful was that it was the working out of an idea through different civilizations, different stages of historical development. And that idea was the idea of human freedom. So it was not individuals or great thinkers alone making history and having an impact. It was the idea itself striving to come to fruition, striving to come to an evermore perfect

realization. In the case of Hegel, in this very Prussian and German context, he identified the realization of freedom also with the growth of the state because he thought that governments are the ones that are going to be able to deliver on laws and on the ideal of a state of the rule of law, in German the Rechtsstaat. That was a noble dream. At the same time, as we recognize from our perspective, state power has been put to all sorts of purposes besides guaranteeing the rule of law in our own times. What Marx did was to take this characteristic insistence of Hegel that history is moving in a meaningful and discernible way towards the realization of an idea and flipped it on its head. Marx insisted that Hegel had so much that was right in his thinking, but what he had neglected to keep in mind was that in fact, history is based on matter. So hence, dialectical materialism, dialectical referring to things proceeding by clashes or conflict towards an ever greater realization of some essential idea. And so Marx adapts a lot of ideas of Hegel. You can recognize entire rhetorical maneuvers that are indebted to that earlier training, but now taken in a very different direction. What remained though was the confidence of being on the right side of history. And there are few things that are as intoxicating as being convinced that your actions not only are right in the abstract, but are also destined to be successful.

### **Lex Fridman**

And also that you have the rigor of science backing you in your journey towards the truth.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Absolutely. So Engels, when he gives the graveside eulogy for his beloved friend Marx, claims that Marx is essentially the Darwin of history, the Darwin of history. That he had done for the world of politics and of human history what Darwin had done with this theory of evolution, understanding the hidden mechanism, understanding the laws that are at work and that make that whole process meaningful rather than just one damn thing after another.

### **Lex Fridman**

What about the sort of famous line that history of all existing societies is the history of class struggles? So what about this conception of history as a history of class struggle?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, so this was the mode of force that Karl Marx and Engels saw driving the historical process forward. And it's important to keep in mind that class conflict doesn't just mean revolutions, revolts, peasant uprisings. It's the totality of frictions and of clashes, conflicts of interest that appear in any society. And so Marx was able in this spirit that he avowed was very scientific to demarcate stages of historical transformation, primitive communism in the prehistoric period, then moving towards what was called state slavery. That's to say the early civilizations deploying human resources and ordering them by all powerful monarchs. Then private slavery in the ancient period. And then moving to feudalism in the Middle Ages.

And then here's where Marx is able to deliver a pronouncement about his own times, seeing that the present day is the penultimate, the next to last stage of this historical development, because the feudal system of the Middle Ages and the dominance of the aristocracy has been overcome, has been displaced by the often heroic achievements, astonishing achievements in commerce and in world-building of the middle class, the bourgeoisie, who have taken the world into their own hands and are engaged in class conflict with the class below them, which is the working class or the proletariat. And so this sort of conflict also, by the way, obtains within classes, so the bourgeoisie are going to be gravediggers Marx announces of their own supremacy because they're also competing against one another. And members who don't survive that competition get pressed down into the subordinate working class, which grows and grows and grows to the point where at some future moment, the inevitable explosion will come and a swift revolution will overturn this penultimate stage of human history and usher in instead the dictatorship of the working class and then the abolition of all classes because with only one class remaining, everyone is finally unified and without those internal contradictions that had marked class conflict before.

### **Lex Fridman**

The dictatorship of the working class is an interesting term. So what is the role of revolution in history?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

So this in particular for Marx, I think is a really key moment, which is what makes that such a good question. In his vision, the epic narrative that he's presenting to us, revolution is key. It's not enough to have evolutionary change. It's not a question of compromises. It's not a case of bargaining or balancing interests. Revolution is necessary as part of the process of a subjugated class coming to awareness of its own historical role. And when we get to the proletariat, this working class in its entirety to whom Marx assigns this epic Promethean role of being the ones who are going to liberate all of humanity, a class that is universal in its interests and in the sort of role in salvation history that they'll be playing in this secular framework, they need revolution and the experience of revolution in order to come into their own. Because without it, you'll only have half-hearted compromise and something less than the consciousness that they then need in order to rule, to administer, and to play the historical role that they're fated to have.

### **Lex Fridman**

How did he conceive of a revolution, potentially a violent revolution stabilizing itself into something where the working class was able to rule?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

That's where things become a good deal less detailed in his and Engels accounts. The answer that they proposed in part was this is for the future to determine, so all of the

details will be settled later. I think there was allied to this was a tremendous confidence in some very 19 century ideas about how society could be administered and what made for orderly society in a way where if the right infrastructure was in place, you might expect society to kind of run itself without the need for micromanagement from above. And hence, we arrive at Marx's tantalizing promise that there will be a period where it will be necessary to have centralized control and there might have to be, as he puts it, despotic inroads against property in order to bring this revolution to pass. But then afterwards, the state, because it represents everybody rather than representing particular class interests that are in conflict with other classes, the state will eventually wither away, so there won't be need for it. Now, that's not to say that pure stasis arrives or that the stabilization equals being frozen in time. It's not as if that is what things will look like. But instead, the big issues will be settled and henceforth people will be able to enjoy lives of, as he would consider it, in authentic freedom without necessity, without poverty as a result of this blessed state that's been arrived at.

### **Lex Fridman**

Despotic inroads against property. Did he elaborate on the despotic inroads?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Dispossession, dispossession of the middle classes and of the bourgeoisie. In his model, humanity is never standing still, right? So he'd probably argue in this dynamic vision of how history unfolds that there's always conflict and it's always moving, propelling history forward towards its predestined ending. In the way he saw this climax was that as things did not stay the same, the condition of the working class was constantly getting worse and hence their revolutionary potential was growing. And at the same time, the expropriators, the bourgeoisie, were also facing diminishing returns as they competed against one another with more and more wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and more and more elements of what had been the middle class detached from the ruling class and being pressed down into the working class. For Marx, this is really a key part. I mean, it's a key part of this whole ratchet effect that's going to produce this final historical explosion. And in German, the word given to that process was *verehlundung*, which is very evocative. *Elend* means misery, so it's the growing misery. When this gets translated into English, the results are never quite as evocative or satisfactory. The words that get used are immiseration or pauperization, meaning more and more people are being turned into paupers. But for Marx, that prediction is really key. And even in his own lifetime, there were already hints that in fact, if you looked sociologically at the really developed working classes in places like Great Britain or Germany, that process was not playing out as he had expected. In fact, although there had been enormous dislocations and tremendous suffering in the early chaotic, Wild West stages of capitalism and of industrialization, there had been reform movements as well. And there had been unions which had sought to carve out rules and agreements with employers for how the conditions under which workers labored might be ameliorated. Moreover, the middle class rather than dwindling and dwindling, seemed to actually be

strengthening and growing in numbers or the appearance of new kinds of people like white-collar workers or technical experts. So already in Marx's own lifetime, and then especially in what follows Marx's lifetime, this becomes a real problem because it puts a stick into the spokes of this particular historical prediction.

### **Lex Fridman**

Can you speak to this realm of ideas, which is fascinating, this battle of big ideas in the 19th century. What are the ideas that were swimming around here?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah, yeah. Well, to describe the 19th century as sort of an age of ideologies is very apt because Europe is being wracked and being put through the wringer of nationalism, demands for self-expression of peoples who earlier have been in empires or under monarchical rule, demands to redraw the map. The tremendous transformations of the Industrial Revolution meant that in the course of about a generation, you would've seen the world around you change in ways that made it entirely unfamiliar. You'd be able to travel across the landscape at speeds that have been unthinkable when you were a child. So it's enormous change and demands for yet more change. And so it's a great mix of ideas, ideologies, the old and the new religious ideas, religious revivals, as well as demands for secularization. And stepping into all of this are Marx and Engels together in what has been called, I think with justice, one of the most important and influential intellectual partnerships of history. They were very different men. They were both German by origin. Marx had trained as an academic. He had married the daughter of a baron. Because of his radical ideas, he had foreclosed or just found himself cut off from a possible academic career and went the route of radical journalism. Engels was very different. Engels was the son of an industrialist and the family owned factories in Germany and in England. So he was most definitely not a member of the proletariat that he and Marx were celebrating as so significant in their future historical role. There were also huge differences in character between these men. Marx, when people met him, they were astonished by his energy and his dynamism. They also saw him as a man who felt determined to dominate arguments. He wanted to win arguments and was not one to settle for compromise or a middle road. He was disorderly in his personal habits. We might mention among other things, that he impregnated the family maid and didn't accept responsibility for the child. He was also not inclined to undertake regular employment in order to support his growing family. That's where Engels came in. Engels essentially from his family fortune and then from his journalism afterwards supported both himself and the Marx family for decades. And so in a sense, Engels made things happen. In the mysterious way that friendships work, the very differences between these men made them formidable as a dynamic duo because they balanced off one another's idiosyncrasies and turned what might've been faults into potential strengths. British historian, A.J.P. Taylor always has a lovely turn of phrase, even when he's wrong about a historical issue. In this case, he was right. He said that Engels had charm and brilliance, Marx was the genius. And Engels saw himself as definitely the junior

partner in this relationship. But here's the paradox. Without Engels, pretty clearly Marx would not have gone on to have the sort of lasting historical impact in the world of ideas that he had.

**Lex Fridman**

Just to throw in the mix, there's interesting characters swimming around. So you have Darwin. He has a... I mean, it's difficult to characterize the level of impact he had. Even just in the religious context, it challenges our conception of who we are as humans. There's Nietzsche who's also, I don't know, hanging around the area. On the Russian side, there's Dostoevsky. So it's interesting to ask maybe from your perspective, did these people interact in the space of ideas to where this is relevant to our discussion, or is this mostly isolated?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I think that it's a part of a great conversation. I think that in their works, they're reacting to one another. Dostoevsky's thought ranges across the condition of modernity and he definitely has things to say about industrialization. I think that they react to one another in these oblique ways rather than always being at each other's throats in direct confrontations. And that's what makes the 19th century so compelling as a story just because of the sheer vitality of the arguments that are taking place in ways big and small.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, we should say here, when you mentioned Karl Marx, maybe the color red comes up for people and they think the Soviet Union, maybe China, but they don't think Germany necessarily. It's interesting that Germany is where communism was supposed to happen.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right.

**Lex Fridman**

And so can you maybe speak to that tension?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this is definitely a factor in the entire history that we're referencing. Marx and Engels never really shed their identity as Germans. Many of their preconceptions, even those traces of nationalism that they had within themselves even as they were condemning nationalism as a fraud against the working class, their clearly, their entire formation had been affected by their German background. And it's very true, as you point out, that Germany is intended to be the place where these predictions will play out, also in Britain, also in France, also eventually in the United States. But it's Germany by virtue of its central location and then its rapid development later than Britain or France in industrialization give it the special role in Marx's worldview. And so it's a lasting irony or a



central irony of this whole story that when a government establishes itself that claims to be following Marx's prescriptions and realizing his vision, it happens in the wreckage of the Russian Empire, a place that did not match the requirements of being industrialized, developed, well on its way in this historical process. And nobody knew this better than the Bolsheviks. Lenin and his colleagues had a keen sense that what they were doing, exciting as it was, was a gamble. It was a risk because in fact, the revolution to really take hold had to seize power in Germany. And that's why immediately after taking power, they're not sure they're going to last. Their hope, their promise of salvation is that a workers' revolution will erupt in Germany, defeated Germany in order to link up with the one that has been launched in this unlikely Russian location and henceforth great things will follow that do hue to Marx's historical vision. The last thing to mention about this is that this predominance of Germany in the thinking of Marx had two other reflections. One was that German socialists and later communists organize in order to fulfill Marx's vision and they produce something that leaves other Westerners in awe in the late 19th century. And that's the building of a strong German workers movement and a Social Democratic Party. That Social Democratic Party by 1912 is the largest party in German politics by vote. And there's the possibility they might even come to power without needing radical revolution, which again, also goes against Marx's original vision of the necessity for a revolution. Workers around the world, or rather radical socialists look with admiration and awe at what the Germans have achieved and they see themselves as trying to do what the Germans have done. The final point is growing up during the Cold War, one thought that, well, if you want to represent somebody as being a communist, that person has to have a Russian accent, because Russia after all, the homeland of this form of government, the Soviet Union, that must be the point of origin. Before the Bolsheviks seized power, in order to really be a serious radical socialist, you needed to read German because you needed to read Marx, and you needed to read Kautsky, and you needed to read Bernstein and other thinkers in this tradition. And it's only after the Soviet seizure of power that this all changes. So there's lots of Marx of that phenomenon.

### **Lex Fridman**

Which is why the clash between nationalism and communism in Germany is such a fascinating aspect of history and all the different trajectories it could take. And we'll talk about it. If we return to the 19th century, you've said that Marx's chief rival was Russian anarchist... Marx's chief rival was Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who famously said in 1942, "The passion for destruction is also a creative passion." So what kind of future did Bakunin envision?

### **Vejtas Liulevicius**

Well, Bakunin in some things agreed with Marx, and in many others, disagreed. He was an anarchist rather than hewing to the sort of scheme of history that Marx was proposing. So he did see humanity as fighting a struggle for a better way of life. He envisioned, as your quote suggests, that revolution and sheer confrontation and overthrow the existing state of things, not compromise, was going to be the way to get there, but his vision was very

different. Rather than organizing conspiratorial and hierarchical political movement, Bakunin envisioned that the ties would be far looser, that both the revolutionary movement and the future state of humanity would grow out of the free association, the anarchist thinking, the free association of individuals who rejected hierarchical thinking in their relations with one another, rejected the state as a form of organized violence, and rejected traditional religious ideas that he saw as buttressing hierarchies. So Bakunin is part of a broader movement of socialists and anarchists who were demanding change and envisioning really fundamental transformation, but his particular anarchist vision steers him into conflict with Marx, and he makes some prophetic remarks about the problems with the system that Marx is proposing. You should add to this that the very fact that Marx is a German by background and Bakunin is Russian adds a further nationalist or element of ethnic difference there. Bakunin warned that a sort of creeping German authoritarianism might insinuate its way into a movement that hewed too closely to having hierarchies in the struggle to overthrow hierarchies, and his anarchist convictions are not in question here. They led him into conflict with Marx, and Marx railed against him, denounced him, and eventually had him expelled from The International. One of the things though that also makes Bakunin so significant is Bakunin is the first in a longer series of approaches between anarchists and communists where they try to make common cause, and you have to say that in every case, it ends badly for the anarchists, because the communist vision in particular, especially in its Leninist version, argued for discipline and a tightly organized professional revolutionary movement. The anarchists who sought to make common cause with communists, whether it was in the days of the Russian Revolution or the Russian Civil War, or whether it was then in the Spanish Civil War, the anarchists found themselves targeted by the communists precisely because of their skepticism about what turned out to be an absolutely key element in the Leninist prescription for a successful revolution.

**Lex Fridman**

If we can take that tangent a little bit, so I guess anarchists were less organized.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah, by definition.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. Why do you think anarchism hasn't been rigorously tried in the way that communism was? If we just take a complete sort of tangent, in one sense, we are living in an anarchy today because the nations are in an anarchic state with each other, but why do you think there's not been an anarchist revolution?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, I think that probably some anarchists would beg to differ, right? They would see communes in Spain during the Spanish Civil War as an example of trying to put anarchist ideas into place. Bakunin flitted from one area of unrest to another, hoping to be in on

finally the founding of the sort of free communes that he had in mind. Another key point in all of this is that anarchy means something different to different people as a term, and so when you point out quite correctly that we have an anarchic international situation, that's the Hobbesian model of the war of all against all, where man is a wolf to man. Generally, except if you're talking about nihilists in the Russian revolutionary tradition, anarchists see anarchy as a blessed state and one where finally, people will be freed from the distorting influence of hierarchies, traditional beliefs, subjugation, inequalities. So for them, anarchy growing out of the liberation of the human being is seen as a positive good and peaceful. Now, that's at odds with the prescription of someone like Bakunin for how to get there. He sees overthrow as being necessary on the route to that, but as we point out, it's absolutely key to this entire dynamic that to be an anarchist means that your efforts are not going to be organized the way a disciplined and tightly organized revolutionary movement would be.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah, it's an interesting stretch that a violent revolution will take us to a place of no violence or very little violence. It's a leap.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

It's a leap, and it points to a phenomenon that would've enraged Marx and would've been deeply alienating to others in the tradition who followed him, but that so many scholars have commented on, and that's that there is a religious element. Not a vowed one, but a kind of hidden religious or secular religious element to Marx's vision, to the tradition that follows Marx, and just think of the correspondences, right? Marx himself positioning himself as a savior figure, whether that's a Prometheus or a Moses who will lead people to the promised land. The apocalypse or the end times is this final revolution that will usher in a blessed final state, a utopia, which is equivalent to a secular version of heaven. There's the working class playing the role of humanity in its struggle to be redeemed, and scholar after scholar has pointed this out. Reinhold Niebuhr back in the 1930s had an article in The Atlantic magazine that talked about the Soviet Union's communism as a religion. Eric Voegelin, a German-American scholar who fled the Nazis and relocated to Louisiana State University and wrote tomes about the new phenomenon of political religions in the modern period. And he saw fascism and Nazism and Soviet communism as bearing the stamp of political religions, meaning ideologies that promised what an earlier age would've understood in religious terms. Voegelin called this the eschaton and said that these end times, the eschaton, was being promised in the here and now, being made imminent, and he warned against that saying the results are likely to be disastrous.

### **Lex Fridman**

So that's actually a disagreement with this idea that people sometimes say that the Soviet Union is an example of an atheistic society. So when you have atheism as the primary thing that underpins the society, this is what you get. So what you're saying is a kind of rejection of that, saying that there's a strong religious component to a communism.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

A hidden component, one that's not officially recognized. I had a chance to witness this actually. When I was a child, my family, I grew up in Chicago to a Lithuanian-American family, and my father, who was a mathematician, got a very rare invitation to travel to Soviet Lithuania, to the University of Vilnius to meet with colleagues. And at this point, journeys of more than a few days or a week were very rare to the Soviet Union for Americans, and the result was that I had unforgettable experiences visiting the Soviet Union in Brezhnev's Day. And among the things I saw, there was a museum of atheism that had been established in a church that had been ripped apart from inside and was meant to embody the official stance of atheism. And I remember being baffled by the museum on the inside because you would expect exhibits, you would expect something dramatic, something that will be compelling, and instead, there was some folk art from the countryside showing bygone beliefs, there were some lithographs or engravings of the Spanish Inquisition and its horrors, and that was pretty much it. But as a child, I remember being reproved in that museum for not wearing my windbreaker, but instead carrying it on my arm, which was a very disrespectful thing to do in an official museum of atheism. When I was able to visit the Soviet Union later for a language course in the summer of 1989, one of the obligatory tours that we took was to file reverently past the body of Lenin outside the Kremlin in the mausoleum at Red Square, and communist mummies, like those of Lenin, earlier, Stalin had been there as well, communist mummies like Mao or Ho Chi Minh really, I think, speak to a blending of earlier religious sensibility, reverence for relics of great figures, almost saintly figures, so that even what got proclaimed as atheism turned out to be a very demanding faith as well, and I think that's a contradiction that other scholars have pointed out as well.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that's a very complicated discussion. When you remove religion as a big component of a society, whether something like a framing of political ideologies in a religious way is the natural consequence of that.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

We hear nature abhorring a vacuum, and I think that there are places in human character that long for transcendental explanations, that it's not all meaningless. In fact, there's a larger purpose, and I think it's not a coincidence that such a significant part of resistance to communist regimes has in part come from, on the one hand, religious believers, and on the other hand, from disillusioned true believers in communism who find themselves undergoing an internal experience of revulsion, finding that their ideals have not been followed through on.

**Lex Fridman**

So this topic is one of several topics that you eloquently describe as contradictions within the ideas of Marx. So religious, there is a kind of religious adherence versus also the rejection of religious dogma that he stood for. We've talked about some of the others, the

tension between nationalism that emerged when it was implemented versus what communism is supposed to be, which is global, so globalism. Then there's the thing that we started talking with, is the individualism. So history is supposed to be defined by the large collection of humans, but there does seem to be the singular figures, including Marx himself, that are really important. Geography of global versus restricted to certain countries, and tradition. You're supposed to break with the past under communism, but then Marxism became one of the strongest traditions in history.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right, that's right. I think that that last one is especially significant because it's deeply paradoxical. Trying to outline these contradictions by the way is like subjecting Marx to the sort of analysis that Marx subjected other people to, which is to point out internal contradictions, things that are likely to become pressure points or cracks that might open up in what's supposed to be a completely set and durable and effective framework. The one about tradition, Marx points out that the need for revolution is in order to break with the traditions that have hemmed people in – these earlier ways of thinking, earlier social structures – and to constantly renovate. And what happens instead is a tradition of radical rupture emerges, and that's really tough, because imagine in the last stages of the Soviet Union where keen observers can tell that there are problems that are building in society. There are discontents and demands that are going to clash, especially when someone like Gorbachev is proposing reforms and things are suddenly thrown open for discussion. The very notion that you have the celebration of revolutionaries and the Bolshevik legacy at a time when the state wants to enforce stability and an order that's been received from the prior generation, think of Brezhnev's time, for instance. All of that is an especially volatile mix and unlikely to work out very durably in the long run.

### **Lex Fridman**

I would love to talk about the works of Marx, the Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital. What can we say that's interesting about the manifestation of his ideas on paper?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, the first thing to note obviously is that those two works are very different. Das Kapital is an enormous multi-volume work that Marx worked at and only got the first volume out because Engels begged him to stop revising. "Please, just finally get it into press," and then the rest, Engels had to actually reconstruct out of notes after Marx passed away. It's a huge work. By contrast, the Communist Manifesto is a brief pamphlet that ended up affecting the lives of many millions worldwide, in spite of its comparative brevity. The Communist Manifesto moreover is also something of the nature of having a delayed fuse, you could say, because when it first appears amid the revolutions of 1848 that sweep across Europe, the work is contrary to what people often believe. That pamphlet did not cause the revolutions of 1848, many of which had national or liberal demands. The voice of Marx and Engels was barely to be heard over the din of other far more prominent actors. It is, however, in the

aftermath that this work takes on tremendous significance and becomes popularly read and popularly distributed. It's especially the episode, the bloody episode of the Paris Commune in 1871 which comes to be identified with Marx. Even though it was not purely inspired by Marx alone, nor were all of the Communards devoted Marxists, it's the identification of this famous or infamous episode in urban upheaval that really leads to worldwide notoriety for Marx and attention to those works. And they're very different in form. *Das Kapital* is intended to be the *Origin of Species* of its realm of economic thought, and represents years and years of work of Marx laboring in the British Museum library, working through statistics, working on little bits and pieces of a larger answer to big historical questions that he believes that he's arrived at. Its tone is different from that of the *Communist Manifesto*, which is a call to arms. It announces with great confidence what the scheme of history will be, but rather than urging that the answer might be passivity and just waiting for history to play out in its preordained way, it's also a clarion call to make the revolution happen and is intended to be a pragmatic, practical statement of how this is to play out, and starts in part with those ringing words about a ghost or a specter haunting Europe, the specter of communism, which wasn't true at the time, but decades later, most definitely is the case.

### **Lex Fridman**

Is there something we could say about the difference between Marxian economics and Marx's political ideology, so the political side of things and the economics side of things?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

So I think that Marx would probably have responded that in fact, those things are indivisible. The analysis as purely theoretical certainly can be performed on any economic reality that you care to mention, but the imperatives that grow out of that economic analysis are political. Marx and Engels emphasize the unity of theory and practice. So it's not enough to dispassionately analyze. It's a call to action as well, because if you've delivered the answer to how history evolves and changes, it obligates you, right? It demands certain action. You sometimes hear from undergraduates that they've heard from their high school history teachers that Marxism was just a theoretical construct that was the idle production of a philosopher who was not connected to the world and was never meant to be tried in practice. Marx would have been furious to hear this and it's almost heroically wrong as a historical statement, because Marx insisted that all previous philosophers have theorized about reality. What now is really necessary is to change it. So you could say that in the abstract, a Marxist economist can certainly use Marx's theoretical framework to compare to a given economic reality, but Marx would have seen that as incomplete and as deeply unsatisfactory. There's a kind of a footnote to all of this, which is that even though Marxist dialectical materialism grounds itself in these economic realities and the political prescription is supposed to flow from the economic realities and be inevitably growing out of them, in the real history of communist regimes, you've actually seen periods where the economics becomes detached from the politics. And I'm thinking in particular of the new

economic period early in the history of the Soviet Union when Lenin realizes that the economy is so far gone that you need to reintroduce or allow, in a limited way, some elements of private enterprise, just to start getting Russia back on course in order to have the accumulation of surplus that will be necessary to build the project at all. And there are many Bolsheviks who see the new economic policy as a terrible compromise and a betrayal of their ideas, but it's seen as necessary for a short while, and then Stalin will wreck it entirely. Or consider for that matter China today, where you have a dominant political class, the Communist Party of China, which is allowing economic development and private enterprise, as long as it retains political control. So some of these elements already represent divergences from what Marx would've expected, and this points to a really key problem or question for all of the history of communism. It has to do with it being a tradition in spite of itself, and that could be expressed in the following way. An original set of ideas is going to evolve, it's going to change, because circumstances change. What elaborations of any doctrine, whether it's communism or a religious doctrine or any political ideology, what elaborations are natural stages in the evolution of any living set of ideas, or when do you reach the point where some shift or some adaptation is so radically different that it actually breaks with the tradition, and that's an insoluble problem. You probably have to take it on a case-by-case basis. It speaks to issues like the question that gets raised today. Is China in a meaningful sense a communist country anymore? And there's a diversity of opinion on this score. Or if you're looking at the history of communism and you look at North Korea, which now is on its third installment of a dynastic leader from the same family who rules like a God king over a regime that calls itself communist, is that still a form of communism? Is it an evolution of? Is it a complete reversal of? I tend to want to take an anthropological perspective in the history of communism and to take very seriously those people who avow that they are communists and this is the project that they have underway. And then after hearing that avowal, I think as a historian, you have to say, well, let's look at the details. Let's see what changes have been made, what continuities might still exist, whether there's a larger pattern to be discerned here. So it's a very, very complicated history that we're talking about.

### **Lex Fridman**

Let's step back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and let's steel man the case for communism. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of the people there, not in this way where we could look back at what happened in the 20th century. Why was this such a compelling notion for millions of people? Can we make the case for it?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, clearly it was a compelling case for millions of people, and part of this story overall has to do with the faith, conviction, stories of people sacrificing themselves as well as their countrymen in a cause that they believed was not just legitimate, but demanded their total obedience. I think that throughout the early part of the 20th century, the late 19th century, early part of the 20th century, so much of the compelling case for communism came from

the confidence that people in the West more generally placed in science, the notion that science is answering problems. Science is giving us solutions to how the world around us works, how the world around us can be improved. Some varieties of that, and watch the quotation marks, "science" were crazy, like phrenology, so-called scientific racism that tried to divide humanity up into discreet blocks and to manipulate them in ways that were allegedly scientific or rational. So there were horrors that followed from those invocations of science, but its prestige was enormous, and that in part had to do with the lessening grip of religious ideas on intellectual elites, more generally, processes of secularization, not total secularization but processes of secularization in Western industrial societies, and the sense that here's the doctrine that will allow escape from wars brought on by capitalist competition, poverty and economic cycles and depressions brought on by capitalist competition, the inequalities of societies that remain hierarchical and class-based. And this claim to being cutting edge science, I think allows people like Lenin to derive immense confidence in the prescription that they have for the future. And that paradoxically, the confidence that you have in broad strokes the right set of answers for how to get to the future also allows you to take huge liberties with the tactics and the strategies that you follow, as long as your ultimate goal remains the one sketched by this master plan. So ultimately, some of the predictions of someone like Lenin, that once society has reached that stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the notion that governments will essentially be able to run themselves, and that the model he had in mind, oddly enough, was Swiss post offices. Being in Swiss exile must have impressed him so much with the orderliness and the sheer discipline and rationality of a Swiss post office, and he thought, "Why can't you organize governments like this where you don't need political leaders, you don't need grand visions? You have procedures, you have bureaucracy, which does its job in a way that's not alienating, but simply produces the greatest good." When you think of the experiences with bureaucracy in the 20th century, one's hair stands on end to have the comparative naiveté on display with a prediction like that, but it derives from that confidence that it's all going to be okay because we understand. We have the key, we have the plan to how to arrive at this final configuration of humanity.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah, the certainty of science, in quotes, and the goal of utopia gets you in trouble. But also, just on the human level, from a working class person perspective, from the industrial revolution, you see the growing inequality, wealth inequality, and there is a kind of, you see people getting wealthy, and combined with the fact that life is difficult, life in general, life is suffering for many, for most, for all if you listen to some philosophers. And there is a powerful idea in that the man is exploiting me, and that's a populist message that a lot of people resonate with because to a degree, it's true in every system. And so before you know how these economic and political ideas manifest themselves, it is really powerful to say, "Here, beyond the horizon, there's a world where the rich man will not exploit my hard work anymore," and I think that's a really powerful idea.



**Vejas Liulevicius**

It is. At the same time though, it kind of points to a further problem and that's the identity of the revolutionaries. It turned out that many of these revolutionary movements and then the founding elites of communist countries in the aftermath of the Soviet seizure of power turn out to be something quite different from people who have spent their lives in factories experiencing the industrial revolution firsthand. There's a special role here for intellectuals, and when Marx and Engels write into the Communist Manifesto the notion that certain exceptional individuals can rise above their class origins in a way other people can't and transcend their earlier role, their materially determined role in order to gain a perspective on the historical process as a whole and ally themselves with the working class and its struggle for communism, this sort of special role that they carved out for themselves is enormously appealing for intellectuals, because any celebration of intellectuals as world movers is going to appeal to intellectuals. That gap, that frequent reality of not being in touch with the very classes that the communists are aiming to represent is a very frequent theme in this story. It also speaks to a crucial part of this story, which is the breaking apart or the Civil War, the war of brother against... Apart or the Civil War, the War of brother against brother, the fraternal struggle that splits socialism and splits followers of Marx. And that's in the aftermath of the First World War in particular, or during this traumatic experience. The way in which Lenin encourages the foundation of radical parties that will break with social democracy of the sort that had been elaborated, especially in places like Germany, scorning their moderation. And instead announcing a new dispensation, which was the Leninist conception of a disciplined, hardcore professional revolutionaries who will act in ways that a mere trade union movement couldn't. And what this speaks to is a fundamental tension in radical movements. Because left to their own devices, Lenin announces, workers tend to focus on their reality, their families, their workplace. Want better working conditions, unionize, and then aim to negotiate with employers or to agitate for reforms on the part of the state to improve their living conditions. And then they're happy for the advances that they have won. And for Lenin, that's not enough, because that's a half measure. That's the sort of thing that leads you into an accommodation with the system rather than the overthrow of the system. So there's a constant tension in this regard that plays itself out over the long haul.

**Lex Fridman**

Let's go to Lenin and the Russian Revolution. How did communism come to power in the Soviet Union?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

It came to power as a result of stepping into a power vacuum. And the power vacuum was created by the First World War, and the effect that it had as a total war. Unprecedented pressure placed on a regime that, in many ways, was a traditional, almost feudal monarchy, only experiencing the beginnings of the modernization that the rest of Europe had undergone. For this reason, communism comes to power in a place that Marx probably

wouldn't have expected, in the wreckage of the Russian Empire. Lenin is absolutely vital to this equation because he's the one who presses the process forward. Ironically, given the claim of communist leaders to having the key to history, just a few months previous in exile in Switzerland Lenin had been despairing and had been convinced that he may not even live to see the advent of that day. But then when revolution does break out in the Russian Empire in February of 1917, Lenin is absolutely frantic to get back. And when he does get back as a result of a deal that is negotiated with the German high command, a step that they'll later live very much to regret. He is able to get back and to go into action and to press for nothing less than the seizure of power that brings his Bolshevik faction, the radical wing of the socialist movement, to power and then to build the Soviet Union.

**Lex Fridman**

Even he was surprised how effective and how fast the revolution happened?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

He was, although I think that he would've agreed that what was necessary was a cataclysm on the scale of the First World War to make this happen. The First World War shatters so many of the certainties of the 19th century that we talked about as a dynamic period with argument between ideologies. It scrambles all sorts of earlier debates. It renegotiates the status of the individual versus an all-powerful state and the claims of the state. Because to win, or even just to survive in World War I, you need to centralize, centralize, centralize, and to put everything onto an authoritarian wartime footing in country after country. So Lenin earlier had already articulated the possibility that this might happen by talking about how the entire globe already was connected. And there's a chain of capitalist development that is connecting different countries so that the weakest link in the chain, if it breaks, if it pops open, it might actually inaugurate much bigger processes and start a chain reaction. That's what he intended to do and has the chance to do in the course of 1917. Incidentally, just to get a sense of the sheer chaos and the human, on an individual human level, what the absence of established authority meant. There's few works of literature that is powerful as Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* for giving the whole sweep of contending forces in a power vacuum. It's an amazing testimony to that time and place.

**Lex Fridman**

You said that Bolsheviks saw violence and terror as necessary. Can you just speak to this aspect of their... Because they took power, so this was a part of the way they saw the world.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Right. And it had antecedents. Even though Lenin and his colleagues are competing amongst each other for the title of most faithful disciple of Marx, and most true to the received theory in practice, there's other influences, earlier influences that operate in the Russian context that were not operative, let's say, in the German context. Here you have to step back and think about the nature of Tsarism, which had maintained, still, into the 20th

century, the notion of a divine right to rule. That God had ordained the Tsarist system and its hierarchies. And that to question these was sinful and politically not advisable. The restrictive nature of Russian society at this point dominated by the Tsarist establishment, its harshness, its reactionary nature meant that people who in another context, in another country might've been reformers, could instead very easily be provoked into becoming revolutionaries. And Lenin is a perfect example of this. Because his older brother was executed as a result of being in a radical revolutionary movement, who was arrested and executed for association with terrorism. Earlier generations of Russian radicals had founded populist groups that would aim to engage in terrorism and resistance against the Tsarist regime. And this included people who call themselves nihilists. And these nihilists were materialists who saw themselves ushering in a new age by absolute rejection of earlier religious traditions and aiming for material answers to the challenges of the day. Among them was Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who wrote what's been called the worst book ever written. It was, in fact, one of Lenin's favorite books, in Russian it's [foreign language 01:10:12]. In English it gets translated What is to Be Done. And it's a utopian novel about revolutionaries and how revolutionaries should act with one another in open ways, new ways, non-traditional ways in order to help usher in the coming revolution. Lenin loved the work and said it had the great merit of showing you how to be a revolutionary. So there's the Marxist influence, and then there's Russian populist nihilist influence, which is also a very live current in Lenin's thinking. When you add these things together, you get an explosive mix. Because Lenin, as a result, and part of this family trauma of his brother, becomes a absolutely irreconcilable enemy of the Tsarist regime and sets about turning himself into what you might call a guided missile for revolution. He turns himself into a machine to produce revolutionary change. And I mean that with little hyperbole. Lenin at one point shared with friends that he loved listening to music, but he tried not to listen to beautiful music like Beethoven because it made him feel gentle. What a revolution demanded was realism, hardness, absolute steely resolve. So Lenin worries even fellow revolutionaries by the intensity of his single-minded focus to revolution. He spends his days thinking about the revolution. He probably dreamt about the revolution. So 24/7 it's an existence where he's paired off other human elements, quite deliberately, in order to turn himself into an effective instigator of revolution. So, when the opportunity comes in 1917, he's primed and ready for that role.

### **Lex Fridman**

It's interesting that Russian nihilism had an impact on Lenin. Traditionally nihilist philosophy rejects all sorts of traditional morality. There's a kind of cynical dark view. Where's the light?

### **Vejtas Liulevicius**

The light is science. The light is science and materialism.

### **Lex Fridman**

Oh boy.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

The nihilists, some of them did a very bad job of hiding their political beliefs because they were famous for wearing blue tinted spectacles, kind of the sunglasses of the late 19th century as a way of shielding their eyes from light. But also having a dispassionate and realistic view of reality outside. So nihilists, as the name would suggest, do reject all prior certainties, but they make an exception for science and see that as the possibility for founding an entirely new mode of existence.

**Lex Fridman**

For most people, I think, nihilism is introduced in the brilliant philosophical work, I don't know if you're familiar with it, by the name of *The Big Lebowski*. Nihilists appear there, and I think they summarize the nihilist tradition quite well. But it is indeed fascinating. And also it is fascinating that Lenin, and I'm sure this influenced Stalin as well, that hardness was a necessary human characteristic to take the revolution to its end.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. So prior generations of nihilists or populists had resembled Lenin's single-mindedness by arguing that one needed total devotion for this. To play this role in society, it was not enough to be somewhat committed. Total commitment was necessary. And the other theme that's at work here obviously is, if we consider Lenin affected by Marxist ideas and the homegrown Russian revolutionary tradition that predates the arrival of Marxist socialism in Russia. It's the theme of needing to adapt to local conditions. So Marxism or communism in Vietnam, or in Cuba, or in Cambodia, or in Russia will be very different in its local adaptations and local themes and resonance than it was in Germany where Marx would've expected all of this to unfold.

**Lex Fridman**

Let's talk about Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, this little interplay that eventually led to Stalin accumulating, grabbing, and taking a hold of power. What was that process like?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Lenin's supreme confidence leads the party through some really difficult steps that involves things like signing the humiliating treaty with the Germans, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Where critics of the Bolsheviks said that no one who loved their country would've agreed to a so Draconian, so harsh a settlement that saw the peeling off of large territories that had belonged to the Russian Empire. Lenin is willing to undertake this because the larger prize. He even says that he's not going to bother to read the treaty because shortly that treaty is going to be a dead letter. His expectation is revolution's going to break out everywhere, especially after we've raised the standard, first of all, in the wreckage of the Russian Empire.

**Lex Fridman**

We should probably say that that treaty, to some small degree, maybe you can elaborate now or later, lays the groundwork for World War II, because there is... Resentment is a thing that with time can lead to just extreme levels of destruction.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Right. For German sensibilities, for German nationalists, that treaty meant that Germany had essentially won World War I. And only a turn of events that many of them couldn't even follow or conceive of, the arrival of American troops, the tipping of the balance in the West, led to that reversal. One of the many scholars and contemporaries pointed out that Germany, between the wars, was full of people who were convinced that Germany had actually not lost the war, however that victory of theirs was defined. So most definitely that groundwork is laid. And incidentally, this is something we can talk about later, World War I and World War II have a lot of linkages like that. And as time goes by, I think historians are going to focus on those linkages even more. But Lenin also in his leadership against the odds, leads the Bolsheviks to power in the Russian Civil War where most betting people would've given them very slight odds of even surviving, given how many enemies they faced off against. Lenin's insistence upon discipline and upon good organization allowed the Bolsheviks to emerge as the winners. And yet a great disappointment follows. Lenin, as we said, had expected that revolution will break out soon everywhere and all it'll be necessary for the Bolsheviks to do, having given the lead, is to link up with others. So he considered that what would be established would be a red bridge between a communist Russia, and once Germany inevitably plunged ahead into its revolutionary transformation, a communist Germany. That doesn't end up happening. On the contrary, what happens in Germany is a out-and-out shooting war between different kinds of socialists. When Germany establishes a democracy that later goes by the name of the Weimar Republic, the government is a government of Social Democrats, moderate Social Democrats who are fearful of what they see as Russian conditions of disorder and who are not necessarily in sympathy with the Leninist vision of tightly-organized authoritarian rule. So communists who revolt in Germany are brutally suppressed by mercenaries, hardened front fighters and nationalist radicals hired by the German socialist government. And the result is a wound that just won't heal in the German socialist movement as a result of this fratricide. It frustrates Lenin's ambitions. So too does the fact that Poland, rather than going Bolshevik, resists attempts by the Bolsheviks to move forward and to connect up with Germany. The Poles, yet again, play a tremendously important historical role in changing the expected course of historical events. It's in the aftermath of these unexpected turns that Lenin and his colleagues realize that they're in this for the long haul. It's necessary to wait longer. They don't lose hope or confidence, you might say, in the eventual coming of international workers revolution. But it's been deferred, it's been put off. So the question then arises, what do you build within a state that's established called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the Soviet Union? Lenin, as a result of an assassination attempt, is deeply affected in his health and would've loved to continue for years longer to steer the regime. But he's sidelined because of his

declining health. And there emerges a contest. A contest between a very charismatic leader, Leo Trotsky on the one hand, who is an amazing orator, who is an intellectual, who has traveled widely in the world, who has seen much of the world, and who is a brilliant writer. A far-ranging intellect, and is seen as extremely radical because of his demand for permanent revolution, the acceleration of revolutionary processes to drive history forward, to strike while the iron is hot. And on the other hand is an extremely unlikely contender for power. That's a man who's probably the antithesis of charisma if you were to meet him in person. A guy with a squeaky, somewhat high-pitched voice, not well-suited to revolutionary oratory. His face pockmarked with the scars of youthful illness and whom, moreover, doesn't speak a fine sophisticated Russian. But speaks a Russian heavily inflected with a Georgian accent from that part of the Russian Empire from which he came. And that was Stalin. I know that you already have a marvelous interview with Stephen Kotkin, the brilliant biographer of Stalin who has so many insights on that subject. The one thing that, even after reading about Stalin, that never ceases to surprise me, even in retrospect, is that Stalin gains a reputation not as a fiery radical, but as a moderate. A man who's a conciliator. Someone who's calm when others are excited. Someone who is able because of his organizational skills to resolve merely theoretical disputes with practical solutions. Now, to fully take this aboard, we have to unknow what we know from our vantage point about Stalin's leadership, Stalin's brutality and eliminating his opposition. The cult of personality that, against all odds, got built up around Stalin so successfully and the absolute dominant role that led him later to be described as Genghis Khan with a telephone. A brutal dictator with ancient barbarism allied to the use of modern technology. While Trotsky is delivering stirring speeches and theorizing, Stalin works behind the scenes to control personnel decisions in the Bolshevik movement and in the state. It's a cliché because it's true, that personnel is policy. Trotsky is increasingly sidelined and then demonized and eventually expelled from the Soviet Union and later murdered in Mexico City. For Stalin, eliminating his enemies turned out to be the solution that he was most comfortable with.

### **Lex Fridman**

From that perspective, there's a lot of fascinating things here. So one, is that you can have a wolf, a brutal dictator in moderate clothing. Just because somebody presents as moderate-

### **Vejdas Liulevicius**

That's right.

### **Lex Fridman**

... doesn't mean they can't be one of the most destructive, not the most destructive, humans in history. The other aspect is, using propaganda you can construct an image of a person. Even though they're uncharismatic not attractive, their voice is no good. All of those aspects, you can still have... There's still, to this day, a very large number of people that see him as a religious type of god-like figure. So the power of propaganda there.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Today, we would call that curating the image, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Curating the image. But to the extent to which you can do that effectively is quite incredible. So in that way also Stalin is a study of the power of propaganda. Can we just talk about the ways that the power vacuum is filled by Stalin, how that manifests itself? Perhaps one angle we can take is how was the secret police used? How did power manifest itself under Stalin?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, before getting to the secret police, I would just want to add the other crucial element, which is Lenin's patronage. Stalin doesn't brawls his way into the Bolshevik party and dominate. He's co-opted and promoted to positions of importance by Lenin who sees him as a somewhat rough around the edges, not very sophisticated, much less cosmopolitan than other Bolsheviks. But dependable, reliable, and committed revolutionary. One of the things that's emerged, especially after archives opened up with the fall of the Soviet Union and we were able to read more and more the communications of Lenin, is that it's not the case that we're talking here about an unconnected series of careers. Rather there are connections to be made. It's true that towards the end of his life, Lenin came to be worried by complaints about Stalin's rudeness towards fellow Bolsheviks. And in his testament, he warned against Stalin's testimonies. Lenin fundamentally saw himself as irreplaceable, so that doesn't really help in a succession struggle. Stalin is able to rely on a secret police apparatus that had been built up under Lenin already. It's very early in the foundation of the Soviet state that the Cheka or the Extraordinary Commission is established as a secret police to terrify the enemies, beat down the opponents of the regime, and to keep an eye on society more generally. The person who's chosen for that task also is an anomaly among Bolsheviks. That is a man of Polish aristocratic background, Feliks Dzierzynski, who comes to be known by the nickname Iron Felix. Here's a man about whom a cult of personality also is created. Dzierzynski is celebrated in the Soviet period as the model of someone who's harsh but fair, an executioner but with a heart of gold. Somebody who loves children. Somebody who has a tender heart, but forces himself to be steely willed against the opponents of the ideological project of the Bolsheviks. Dzierzynski is succeeded by figures who will be absolutely instrumental to Stalin's exercise of power, and they're not immune either. Stalin, in his purges, takes care also to purge the secret police as a way of finding others upon whom to deflect blame for earlier atrocities and to produce a situation where even committed Bolsheviks are uncertain of what's going to happen next and feel their own position to be precarious. Incidentally, there are other influences that probably wrought to bear here as well. It gets said about Stalin that he used to spend a lot of time flipping through Machiavelli's *The Prince*. It seems that Stalin's personal copy of *The Prince*, nobody knows where that is, if it still exists. But historians have found annotations in works by Lenin that Stalin, who was a voracious reader, as it turns out, made in the back of one of the

books. Which sounds almost like a commentary on Machiavelli's, almost but not quite, suggestion that the ends justify the means. Stalin's own writing says that if someone is strong, active, and intelligent, even if they do things that other people condemn, they're still a good person. So Stalin's self-conception of himself is someone who along these lines and in line with Lenin's emphasis on practical results and discipline, somebody who gets things done. That's the crucial ethical standard. And ultimately in criticisms by later dissidents of Bolshevik morality, this question of, what is the ethical standard? What is the ethical law? We'll bring this question into focus because by the... And this goes back to Marx as well, incidentally. The notion that any ethical system, any notion of right or wrong is purely a product of class identity. Because every class produces its distinctive ideas, its distinctive religion, its distinctive art forms, its distinctive styles. Means that with no one transcendent or absolute morality, it's all up for grabs. And then it's a question of power and the exercise of power with no limits, untrammelled by any laws whatsoever. Dictatorship in its purest form. Something that Lenin had avowed, and then Stalin comes to practice even more fully.

### **Lex Fridman**

Not that it's possible to look deep into a person's heart, but if you look at Trotsky, you could say that he probably believed deeply in Marxism and communism. Probably the same with Lenin. What do you think Stalin believed? Was he a believer? Was he a pragmatist that used communism as a way to gain power and ideology as part of propaganda? Or did he, in his own private moments, deeply believe in the utopia?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

That's an excellent question. And you're quite right, we cannot peer into the inmost recesses of somebody's being and know for sure. My intuition, though, is that this may be a false alternative, a false dichotomy. It's natural enough to see somebody who does monstrous things to say, "Well, this ideology is being used as a cover for it." My suspicion is that these were actually perfectly compatible in his historical role. The notion that there's an ideology, it gives you a master plan for how history is going to develop and your own power, the increase of that power to unprecedented proportions. Your ability to torment even your own faithful followers in order just to see them squirm, which Stalin was famous for, to keep people unsettled. To me, it seems that, for some people, those might not actually be opposed, but might even be mutually reinforcing, which is a very scary thought.

### **Lex Fridman**

It's terrifying, but it's really important to understand. If we look at when Stalin takes power at some of the policies. The collectivization of agriculture. Why do you think that failed so catastrophically, especially in the 1930s with Ukraine and Poland and more?



## **Vejas Liulevicius**

I think the short answer is that the Bolsheviks in particular, but also communists more generally have had a very conflicted relationship with agriculture. Agriculture, as a very vital, obviously, but also very traditional and old form of human activity has about it all of the smell of tradition and other problematic factors as well. In a place like Russia or the Russian Empire peasants, throughout history, for centuries, had wanted one thing, and that was to be left alone to farm their own land. That's their utopia. And that, for someone like Marx who had a vision of historical development and transcendence- ... who had a vision of historical development and transcendence and progress as being absolutely key does not mesh at all with that vision. For that reason, when Marx comes up with this tableau, this tremendous display of historical transformation taking place over centuries and headed towards the final utopia, the role of farmers there is negligible. Peasants get called conservative and dull as sacks of potatoes in Marx's historical vision because they're limited in their horizon. They farm their land, their plot, and don't have greater revolutionary goals beyond working the land and having it free and clear. By contrast, industrialization, that's progress. I mean, images that today would be deeply disturbing to an environmentalist's sensibility. Smokestacks, belching smoke, the byproducts of industry, a landscape transformed by the factory model. That's what Marx, and then later the Bolsheviks, have in mind. Similarly, the goal even as articulated in Marx's writings, is to put agriculture and farming on a factory model so that you won't need to deal with this traditional role of the independent farmer or the peasant. Instead, you'll have people who benefit from progress, benefit from rationalization by working factory farms. So, in approaching the question of collectivization, we have to keep in mind that for Stalin and his comrades who are bound and determined to drag Russia kicking and screaming into the modern age and not to allow it be beaten because of its backwardness, as Stalin puts it, traditional forms of agriculture are not what they have in mind. And in their rank of desired outcomes, industrialization, especially massive heavy industry is the sine qua non, that's their envisioned future. Agriculture rates below. So in that case, the crucial significance of collectivization is to get a handle on the food situation in order to make it predictable and not to find oneself in another crisis like during the Civil War, when the cities are starving, industry is robbed of labor and the factories are at a standstill. So, this is really the core approach to collectivization, to put the productive capacities of the farmers in a regimented way, in a state-controlled way under the control of the state. This produces vast human suffering because for the farmers, their plot of land that they thought they had gained as a result of the revolution is now taken away. They no longer have the same incentives they had before to be successful farmers. In fact, if you're a successful farmer and maybe have a cow as opposed to your neighbors who have no cow, you're defamed and denounced as a kulak, a tight-fisted, exploiter, even though you might be helping to develop agriculture in the region that you're from. So, the result is human tragedy on a vast scale. And allied to that incidentally is Stalin's sense that this is a chance to also target people who are opposed to the Bolshevik regime for other reasons, whether it's because of their Ukrainian identity, whether it's because of a desire for a different nationalist project. For Stalin, there are many

motives that roll into collectivization. And the final thing to be said is you are quite right that collectivization proves to be a failure because the Soviet Union never finally gets a grasp on the problems of agricultural production. By the end of the Soviet Union, they're importing grain from the West in spite of having some tremendously rich farmland to be found worldwide. And the reason for that had to do in part, I think with the incentives that had been taken away. Prosperous individual farmers have a motive for working their land and maximizing production. By contrast, if you are an employee of a factory style agricultural enterprise, the incentives run in very different directions. And the joke that was common for decades in the Soviet Union and other communist countries with similar systems was, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." Even labor, which is rhetorically respected and valorized in practice is rewarded with very slim rewards. And the last point, immobility. The collectivization reduces the mobility of the peasants who are not allowed because of internal passports to move to the cities unless they have permission. They're locked in place. And I got to say, at the time and afterwards, that looked a lot like feudalism or neo-feudalism in terms of the restrictions on workers in the countryside.

**Lex Fridman**

It is a terrifying, horrific and fascinating study of how the ideal, when meeting reality, fails. The idea here is to make agriculture more efficient, so be more productive, so the industrialized model. But the implementation through collectivization had all the elements that you've mentioned that contended with human nature. First with the kulaks, so the successful farmers were punished. And so then the incentive is not just to be a successful farmer, but to hide. Added to that, there's a growing quota that everybody's supposed to deliver on that nobody can deliver on. And so now, because you can't deliver on that quota, you're basically exporting all your food and you can't even feed yourself. And then you suffer more and more and more and there's a vicious downward spiral of you can't possibly produce that. Now there's another human incentive where you're going to lie. Everybody lies on the data.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right.

**Lex Fridman**

And so even Stalin himself probably, as evil or incompetent as he may be, was not even getting good data about what's even happening. Even if he wanted to stop the vicious downward cycle, which he certainly didn't, but he wouldn't be even able to. So, there's all these dark consequences of what on paper seems like a good ideal. And it's a fascinating study of things on paper-

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yes. That's right.

**Lex Fridman**

... when implemented, can go really, really bad.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. And the outcome here is a horrific manmade famine. Not a natural disaster, not bad harvest, but a manmade famine as a result of then the compulsion that gets used by the Soviet state to extract those resources, cordoning off the area, not allowing starving people to escape. You put very well some of the implications of this case study and how things look in the abstract versus in practice. And those phenomena were going to haunt the rest of the experience of the Soviet Union. The whole notion that up and down the chain of command, everybody is falsifying or tinkering with or prettifying the statistics or their reports in order not to look bad and not to have vengeance visited upon them reaches the point where nobody, in spite of the pretense of comprehensive knowledge, there's a state planning agency that creates five-year plans for the economy as a whole, and which is supposed to have accurate statistics. All of this is founded upon a foundation of sand. That's inadvertent. That's not an intended side effect. But what you described in terms of the internal dynamics of fostering conflict in a rural society was absolutely not inadvertent. That was deliberate. The doctrine was you bring civil war. Now had there been social tensions before? Of course there had. Had there been envies, had there been differentiations in wealth or status? Of course there had been, but a deliberate plan to bring class conflict and bring civil war and then heighten it in the countryside does damage, and not least of that is this phenomenon of a negative selection. Those who have most enterprise, those who are most entrepreneurial, those who have most self-discipline, those who are best organized will be winnowed again and again and again, sending the message that mediocrity is comparatively much safer than talent. And this pattern incidentally gets transposed and in tremendously harrowing ways also to the entire group of Russian intelligentsia and intellectuals of other peoples who are in the Soviet Union. They discover similarly that to be independent, to have a voice which is not compliant, carries with it tremendous penalties, especially in Stalin's reigns of terror.

**Lex Fridman**

Again, a difficult question about a psychology of one human being, but to what degree do you think Stalin was deliberately punishing the farmers and the Ukrainian farmers? And to what degree was he looking the other way and allowing the large-scale incompetence, the horrific incompetence of the collectivization of agriculture to happen?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, I think it was both things, right? I mean, there were not only sins of omission, but also sins of commission. Incidentally, one should add, I don't think for Stalin it was personal. These are people who are very remote from him. He, never coming into contact with the people who are suffering in this way. Attributed to him is the quote that, "One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic." I think he in action certainly acted in a way that

would vindicate that. But the process of collectivization was not just a bureaucratic snafu following on bureaucratic snafu. There was the mobilization of communist youth, of military, of party activists to go into the regions and to search for hidden food, to extract the food where it could be found. And we have testimony to this in the case of people who later became dissidents, like Lev Kopelev, who wrote in his memoirs about how he was among those who were sent in to enact these policies, and he saw families with the last food being taken away even as signs of starvation were visible already in the present. And yet he did not go mad. He didn't kill himself. He didn't fall into despair because he believed, because he had been taught and believed at least then that this was justified. This was a larger historical process and a greater good would result even from these enormities. So, I think that this was quite deliberate.

### **Lex Fridman**

Following this, as you've mentioned, there was the process of the Great Terror, where the intellectuals, where the Communist Party officials, the military officers, the bureaucrats, everybody. 750,000 people were executed, and over a million people were sent to the Gulag. What can you say by way of wisdom from this process of the Great Terror that Stalin implemented from '36 to '38?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, the terror had a variety of victims. There were people who were true believers and who were Bolsheviks, who were especially targeted by Stalin because he aimed to revenge himself for all the sort of condescension that he'd experienced in that movement before. And also to eliminate rivals or potential rival power centers and members of their families. And then there were people who simply got caught up in a process whereby the repressive organs in the provinces were sent quotas. You have to achieve your quota and maybe even better yet, overachieve your quota, over perform. That would be the key to success and rising in the bureaucracies in the age of the terror. What's so horrifying is the way in which a whole society stood paralyzed in this process and how neighbors would be taken away in the middle of the night and people would be wary of talking about it. Resistance, at least in these urban centers, was entirely paralyzed by fear when, if one had somehow find a way to mobilize, somehow a way to resist the process, the results might've been different. There's an astonishing book... I mean, there are so many great books that have come out quite recently even on these topics. Orlando Figes has a amazing book called *The Whisperers* that traces several families' history in the Stalin period, and it's a testimony to how a whole society and some of its most intelligent people got winnowed again and again and again in that process of negative selection that we talked about. The lasting dislocation and scars that this left and the way in which how people were not able to talk about these things in public because that would put you next on the list, suspected of having less than total devotion to the state. I think one of the things that also is so terrifying about the entire process is even total devotion wasn't enough. The process took on a life of its own, and I think that it might even have surprised Stalin in some ways. Not enough to short-circuit the

process, but the notion where people were invited to denounce neighbors, coworkers, maybe even family members, meant that ever larger groups of people would be brought into the orbit of the secret police, tortured in order to produce confessions. Those confessions then would lead to more lists of suspects of people who had to be investigated and either executed or sent to the gulags. The uncertainty that this produced was enormous. Even loyalty was not enough to save people. The stories, Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago is full of stories of dedicated communists who find themselves in the Gulag and are sure that some mistake has been made. And if only comrade Stalin would hear about this terrible thing that has happened to them, surely it would be corrected and nothing like this would... Everyone else, by contrast, accused of terrible crimes, there must be some truth behind that. So, talk about ways of disaggregating a society, ways of breaking down bonds of trust. This left lasting traces on an entire society that endured to this very day.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah, there again, a fascinating study of human nature, that there essentially was an emergent quota of confessions of treason. So, even though the whole society was terrified and were through terror, loyal, there still needed to be a lot of confessions of people being disloyal, so you're just making up now. At a mass scale, stuff is being made up. And it's also the machine of the secret police starts eating itself because you want to be confessing on your boss. It is just this weird, dark, dynamic system where human nature just it at its worst.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

### **Lex Fridman**

Why, if we look at this deep discussion we had about Marxism, to what degree can we understand from that lens why the implementation of communism in the Soviet Union failed in such a dark way? Both in the economic system with agriculture and industrialization, and on the human way with just violation of every possible human right and the torture and the suffering and gulags and all of this?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, I think some of it comes back to the ethical grounding that we mentioned earlier. The notion that ethics are entirely situational and that any ethical system is an outgrowth of a particular class reality, a particular material reality, and that leaves the door wide open. So, I think that that aspect was present from the very beginning. I think that the expectations of Marx, that the revolution would take hold and be successful in a developed country, played a role here as well. Russia, which compared to the rest of Europe, was less developed even before the First World War is in a dire state after all of the ravage and the millions of deaths that continue even after the war has ended in the West. That leaves precious little in the way of structural restraints or a functioning society that would say, "Let's not do things this way." I think that in retrospect, that special role carved out for special individuals who can

move this process forward and accelerate historical development allowed for people to step into those roles and appoint themselves executors of this ideological vision. So, I think those things played a role as well.

### **Lex Fridman**

Now, it's hard to do counterfactual history, but to what degree is this basically that the communist ideals create a power vacuum and a dictator type figure steps in, and then it's a roll of the dice of what that dictator is like? So can you imagine a world where the dictator was Trotsky. Would we see very similar type of things? Or is the hardness and the brutality of somebody like Stalin manifested itself in being able to look the other way as some of these dark things were happening more so than somebody like Trotsky who would presumably see the realizations of these policies and be shocked?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, counterfactuals are hard, like you said. And one very quickly gets off into really deep waters in speculation. There were contemporaries and there have been scholars since who suggest that Trotsky, by all indications might've been even more radical than Stalin in the tempo that he wanted to achieve. Think of the slogan of permanent revolution. Trotsky also, who dabbled in so many things in his intellectual life, also spoke in almost utopian terms that are just astonishing to read. In utopian terms about the construction of the new man and the new woman, and that out of the raw material of humanity, once you really get going, and once you've established a system that matches your hopes for the future, it'll be possible to reconfigure people. And talk about ambition, to create essentially the next stage in human evolution, a new species growing out of humanity. Those don't sound like very modest or limited approaches, and I guess we just really won't know.

### **Lex Fridman**

Do some of the destructive characteristics of communism have to go hand in hand? So, the central planning that we talked about, the censorship with the secret police, the concentration of power in one dictatorial figure. And let's say again with the secret police, the violent oppression.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

One should add to those factors that have a kind of interrelated logic of their own, the sheer fact that communism comes to power in most of these instances as a result of war. As a result of the destruction of what came before and a power vacuum. So, think of the Russian revolutions in the wake of the fall of Tsarism. Think of the expansion of Stalin's puppet regimes into Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II and the Red Army moving into occupied areas in Eastern Europe, although they announced that they're coming as liberators. Consider the foundation of communist China on the heels of World War II, and yet more Chinese civil war. Consider cases like Korea, Vietnam. It's likely that this already is a key element in setting things up for further crisis because upon seizure of power, if your

expectation is, "Well, it ought to be relatively easy to get this system rolling and put it on a basis that's after all, we have the roadmap to the future," there will follow frustrations and impediments and resistance. And there's a ratchet effect then there because it'll produce more repression, producing even more problems that follow. What drives the whole thing forward, though, especially in its Leninist version, but already visible with Marx and Engels is the insistence on confidence. If you have the key to the future, all of these things are possible and necessary. This leads to an ethos. I think that that's very hard for historians to quantify or to study in a methodical way, but it's the insistence that you hear with Lenin and then especially with Stalin, that to be a Bolshevik means to be hard, to be realistic, to be consequential, meaning you don't shy away from doing what needs to be done. Even if your primordial ethical remainders from whatever earlier experience you have, rebel against it. Under Stalin, there's a constant slogan of the Bolshevik tempo. The Bolsheviks, there's no fortresses that they can't storm. They can do everything. And in a way, this is the assertion that its will over everything. History can be moved forward and accelerated and probably your own actions justified as a result, no matter what they were, if you are sufficiently hard and determined and have the confidence to follow through. And then that obviously raises the ultimate question, what happens when that confidence ebbs or erodes or when it's lost?

### **Lex Fridman**

If we go to the 1920s to the home of Karl Marx. Fascism, as implemented by the Nazi party in Germany, was called the National Socialist German Workers Party. So, what were the similarities and differences of fascism, socialism, how it was conceived of in fascism and communism? And maybe you could speak to the broader battle of ideas that was happening at the time and battle of political control that was happening at the time.

### **Vejtas Liulevicius**

Well, I mean, there's a whole bunch of terms that are in play here, right? And when we speak of fascism, fascism in its original sense is a radical movement founded in Italy, which though it had been allegedly on the winning side of World War I is disappointed with the lack of rise in national prestige and territory that commences after the end of the. So bizarrely enough, it's a socialist by the name of Benito Mussolini, who crafts an ideological message of glorification of the state. The people at large united in a militaristic way, on the march, ready to attack, ready to expand. A complete overthrow of liberal ideas of the rights of the individual or of representative democracy, and instead, vesting power in one leader, in his case, the Duce, Mussolini, in order to replicate in peacetime the ideal of total military mobilization in wartime. Although the Nazis in Germany are inspired and borrow heavily from fascist ideology, there also are different emphases that they include, and that includes their virulent racism from the outset, which in addition to a glorification of the state, glorification of the leader and preparation for national greatness, race is absolutely core. And it's that racial radicalism that the Nazis espouse as a central idea, along with anti-Semitism, the demonizing in particular of the Jews and this insane racist cosmology that the Nazis avow. It is the assertion that the Nazis will uniquely bring to pass unity in the

people, unity in the society that leads them to give themselves this odd name of national socialist. Some leaders like Goebbels among the Nazis, accent the socialist part to begin with. Others put the accent firmly on the nationalist part. In part, the term they chose for their movement was meant to be confusing. It was meant to take slogans or words from different parts of the political spectrum, to fuse them into something unfamiliar and new, and claim that they'd overcome all earlier political divisions. The Nazis claimed that they were a movement, not a party, even though their party was called a party. So, what did Nazism and Bolshevism and Communism share, or how were they opposed to one another? What we need to start with, by making clear, they were ideological arch enemies. In both worldviews, the opposite side represented the ultimate expression of the evil that needed to be exercised from history in order for their desired utopia to be brought about. And this leads to strange and perverted beliefs about reality. From the perspective of the Nazis. The Nazis claimed that because they saw the Jews as a demonic element in human history, the Bolsheviks didn't really believe all of this economic dialectical materialism. They were in fact a racial conspiracy, it was alleged. And so the Nazis used a term of Judeo-Bolshevism to argue that communism is essentially a conspiracy steered by the Jews, which was complete nonsense. For their part, the communists, and from the perspective of the Soviet Union, the Nazis were in essence a super capitalist conspiracy. If the cosmological enemy are the capitalists and the owners, the exploiters, then all of the rigamarole about race and nationalism are distractions. They're meant to fool the poor saps who enlist in that movement. It's essentially steered by capitalist owners who, it is claimed, are reduced to this desperate expedient of coming up with this thuggish- ... To this desperate expedient of coming up with this thuggish party that represents the last gasp of capitalism. So, bizarrely enough, from the Communist perspective, the rise of the Nazis can be interpreted as a good sign because it means that capitalism is almost done because this is the last undisguised, naked face of capitalism nearing its end. Beyond this ideological total opposition, in terms of their hoped-for futures, the reality is that there were aspects that were shared on either side. That included the conviction that they could agree that the age of democracy was done and that the 19th century had had its day with experiments with representative democracy, the claims of human rights, classical liberal ideas, and all of this had been revealed as bankrupt. It had gotten you what? It got you, first, the First World War as a total conflict leaving tens of millions dead. And then, economically, The Great Depression, showing that the end was not far away. This produced, at one in the same time, both ideological opposition and instances, a vastly cynical cooperation. In terms of the Weimar Republic, it's obvious, with the benefit of hindsight, that German democracy had ceased to function even before Hitler comes to power. But in the process of making democracy unworkable in Germany, the extremes, the Nazi Stormtrooper Army with their brown shirts and the Communist street fighters, had cooperated in heightening an atmosphere of civil war that left people searching for desperate expedience in the last days of the Weimar Republic. The most compelling case of their cooperation was the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 23rd, 1939, which enables Hitler to start World War II. A Non-Aggression Pact, in official terms, it contained secret clauses whereby the Nazis and



the Soviets meeting in Moscow under Stalin's wary eye, had agreed on territorial division of Eastern Europe and making common cause as each claiming to be the winner of the future. So, in spite of their oppositions, these were regimes that were able, very cynically, to work together to dire effect. In the course of the 1950s, in particular, there arose political scientists who also crafted an explanation for ways in which these regimes, although they were opposed to one another, actually bore morphological resemblances. They operated in ways that, in spite of ideological differences, bore similarities. And such political scientists, Hannah Arendt, chief among them, crafted a model called Totalitarianism, borrowing a term that the Fascists had liked about themselves, to define regimes, like the Nazis, like Stalin's Soviet Union, for a new kind of dictatorship that was not a backwards-cast revival of ancient barbarism but was something new, a new form of dictatorship that laid total claims on hearts and minds, that didn't want just passive obedience but wanted fanatical loyalty. That combined fear with compulsion in order to generate belief in a system, or at the very least, atomize the masses to the point where they would go along with the plans of the regime. This model has often met with very strong criticism on the grounds that no regime in human history has yet achieved total control of the population under its grip. That's true, but that's not what Hannah Arendt was saying. Hannah Arendt was saying, "There will always be inefficiencies, there will be resistance, there will be divergences." What was new was not the alleged achievement of total control, it was the ambition, the articulation of the ambition that it might be possible to exercise such fundamental and thoroughgoing control of entire populations. And the final frightening thought that Arendt kept before her was, "What if this is not a model that comes to us from benighted uncivilized ages? What if this is what the future is going to look like?" That's a horrifying intuition.

### **Lex Fridman**

So let me ask you about Darrell Cooper, who is a historian and podcaster, did a podcast with Tucker Carlson, and he made some claims there and elsewhere about World War II. There are two claims that I would love to get your perspective on. First, he stated that Churchill was "The chief villain of the Second World War." I think Darrell argues that Churchill forced Hitler to expand the war beyond Poland into a global war. Second, the mass murder of Jews, Poles, Slavs, Gypsies, in death camps was an accident, a by product of global war. And in fact, the most humane extermination of prisoners of war possible, given the alternative, was death by starvation. So I was wondering if you can respond to each of those claims. Well, I think that this is a bunch of absurdity and it would be laughable if it wasn't so serious in its implications. To address the points in turn, Churchill was not the chief villain of the Second World War. The notion that Churchill allegedly forced Hitler to escalate and expand a conflict that could have been limited to Poland, that assertion is based on a complete neglect of what Nazi ideology was. The Nazi worldview and racism was not a ideology that was limited in its application, it looked toward world domination. In the years since the Nazis had come to power, they sponsored programs of education called geopolitics, which urged Germans to think incontinence, think incontinence, to see themselves as one of the superpowers that would battle for the future of the world. Now in retrospect, we of course

can see that Germany was not in a position to legitimate a claim like that but the Nazis aims were anything but limited. In particular, this sort of argument has been tried out in different ways before. In previous decades, there had been attempts by historians who were actually well-read and well-published to argue that World War II had been, in part, a contingent event that had been brought about by accidents or miscalculations. And such explanations argued that, if you put Hitler's ideology aside you actually could interpret him as a pretty traditional German politician in the stripe of Bismarck. Now, when I say it like that I think you can spot the problem immediately, when you put the ideology aside. To try to analyze Hitler's acts or alleged motives, in the absence of the ideology that he himself subscribed to and described in hateful detail in *Mein Kampf* and other manifestos and speeches, is an enterprise that's doomed to failure justifiably. The notion that the mass murder of Jews, Poles, Slavs, and Gypsies was an event that simply happened as a result of unforeseen events, and that it was understood as somehow being humane, also runs contrary to the historical fact. When Poland was invaded, the Nazis unleashed a killing wave in their so-called Operation Tannenberg, which sent in specially trained and ideologically pre-prepared killers who were given the name of the units of the *Einsatzgruppen* in order to wipe out the Polish leadership and also to kill Jews. This predates any of the Operation Barbarossa and the Nazi's invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazis, moreover, in many different expressions of their ideology, had made clear that their plans, you can read this in *Mein Kampf*, for Eastern Europe, were subjugation and ethnic cleansing on a vast scale, so I consider both of these claims absolutely untenable, given the facts and documents. So do you think it was always the case that Nazi Germany was going to invade the Soviet Union?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

I think, as you can read in *Mein Kampf*, this is what's necessary in order to bring that racial utopia to pass. And so, while the timetable might be flexible, while obviously geopolitical constellations would play a role in determining when such a thing might be possible, it was most definitely on his list. And I would want to add, that in my own scholarship I've worked to explore some of these themes a little bit further. My second book, which is entitled *The German Myth of the East*, which appeared with Oxford University Press, examines centuries in the German encounter with Eastern Europe and how Germans have thought about Eastern Europe, whether in positive ways or in negative ways. And one thing that emerges from this investigation is that even before the Nazis come to power in Germany there are certainly negative and dehumanizing stereotypes about Eastern Europeans, some of them activated by the experiences of German occupation in some of these regions during the First World War. But the Nazis take the very most destructive and most negative of all those stereotypes and make them the dominant ones, making no secret of their expected future of domination and annihilation in the East.

### **Lex Fridman**

The idea of *Lebensraum*, is it possible to implement that idea without Ukraine?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Hitler has Ukraine in his horizon as one of the chief prizes. And the Nazis then craft extensive plans, a master plan that they work on in draft, after draft, after draft, even as the balance of the war is turning against them on the Eastern front. This master plan is called the Generalplan Ost, meaning the general plan for the East. And it foresees things like mega highways on which the Germanic master race will travel to vacation in Crimea, or how their settlements will be scientifically distributed in the wide open spaces of Ukraine for agriculture that will feed an expanded and purified Germanic master race. So this was not peripheral to the Nazi ambitions, but central.

**Lex Fridman**

As I best understand, there is extensive and definitive evidence that the Nazis always wanted to invade the Soviet Union and there was always a racial component, and not just about the Jews. They wanted to enslave and exterminate the Jews, yes, but the Slavic people, the Slavs. And if he was successful at conquering the Soviet Union, I think the things that would be done to the Slavic people would make the Holocaust seem insignificant. In my understanding in terms of the numbers and the brutality and the viciousness in which he characterized the Slavic people.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

In their worldview, the Jews were especially demonized. And so, the project of the domination of Eastern Europe involves this horrific program of mechanized, systematized, bureaucratically organized, and horrifyingly efficient mass murder of the Jewish populations. What the Nazis expected for the Slavs had a longer timeline. Himmler expected, the head of the SS. The SS is given a special mission to be part of the transformation of these regions ethnically, and Himmler, in his role of envisioning this German future in Eastern Europe, gives such a chilling phrase. He says that while certain Slavs will fall victim immediately, some proportion of Slavs will not be shipped out or deported or annihilated but instead they will remain as slaves for our culture. And in that one phrase, Himmler managed to defile and deface everything that the word culture had meant to generations of the best German thinkers and artists in the centuries before the Nazis. The notion of slaves for our culture was part of his longer term expectation. And then, there's finally a fact that speaks volumes about what the Nazis planned for the east. Hitler and Himmler envisioned permanent war on the Eastern Front, not a peace treaty, not a settlement, not a border, but a constant moving of the border, every generation, hundreds of miles east in order to keep winning more and more living space. And with analogy to other frontiers, to always give more fighting experience and more training and aggression to generation after generation of German soldiers. In terms of nightmarish visions, this one's right up there.

**Lex Fridman**

And always repopulating the land conquered with the German, the Aryan race, so in terms of race, repopulating with race. Enslaving the Slavic people and exterminating them. Because there's so many of them, it takes a long time to exterminate.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

And even in the case of the Germans themselves, the hidden message behind even Nazi propaganda about unity and about German national identity was, the Nazis envisioned relentless purges of the German genetic stock as well. So among their victims are people with disabilities, people who are defined as not racially pure enough for the future, even though they are clearly Germans by identity. The full scale and the comprehensive ambitions of the Nazis are as breathtaking as they are horrifying.

**Lex Fridman**

One of the other things I saw Daryl tweet was that what ended up happening in the Second World War was the worst possible thing that could have happened, and I just also wanted to comment on that. Which I can imagine a very large number of possible scenarios that could have happened that are much, much worse, including the successful conquering of the Soviet Union. As we said, the kind of things that would be done, and the total war ever ongoing for generations, which would result in hundreds of millions of deaths and torture and enslavement, not to mention the other possible trajectory of the nuclear bomb.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right, that's right. I would think that the Nazis with atomic weapons, with no compunctions about deploying them, would rank up there as even worse than the horrors that we saw.

**Lex Fridman**

Now, let me steel man a point that was also made as part of this, that the oversimplified narrative of sort of, to put it crudely, Hitler bad, Churchill good, has been used and abused by neocons and warmongers and the military industrial complex, in the years since, to basically say this particular leader is just like Hitler or maybe Hitler of the 1930s and we must invade now before he becomes the Hitler of the 1940s. That has been applied in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, and God forbid, that can be also applied in the war with China in the 21st century. So yes, warmongers do sure love to use Hitler and apply that template to wage war. We should be wary of that and be careful of that, both the over application of this historical template onto the modern world and of warmongers in general.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah, and I think that nobody should like oversimplified narratives. We need subtle and accurate narratives.

**Lex Fridman**

And also, I just would like to say that probably, as we've been talking about Stalin and Hitler, are singular figures. And just as we've been talking about the implementation of these totalitarian regimes, they are singular in human history, that we never saw anything like it and I hope, from everything it looks like, we'll never see anything like it again.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I mean, there's certainly striking and unique historical characters in the record. One of the things that's so disturbing about Hannah Arendt's model of totalitarianism is, the leader can be changed. The system itself demands that there be a leader who allegedly is all-powerful and all-knowing and prophetic and the like, but whether particular figures are interchangeable in that role is a key question.

**Lex Fridman**

Let me go back to the 1920s and sort of ask another counterfactual question. Given the battle between the Marxists and the Communists and National Socialists, was it possible and what would that world look like if the Communists indeed won in Germany as Karl Marx envisioned, and it made total sense given the industrialized expanse that Germany represented. Was that possible and what would it look like if it happened?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I would think that the reality was probably very remote, but that was certainly their ambition. German Communists get quoted as saying, "After Hitler, it's our turn." Their sentiment was that the arrival of Nazism on the scene was a sign of how decrepit and incompetent and doomed capitalism was. In hindsight, that's almost impossible to believe because what happens is, the Nazis with their characteristic brutal ruthlessness, simply decapitate the party and arrest the activists who are supposed to be waiting to take over. So that's forestalled. A further hypothetical that gets raised a lot is, couldn't the social Democrats and the Communists have worked together to keep Hitler out of power? That's where the prior history comes into play. The very fact that the German revolution in 1919 sees Socialists killing Socialists produces a dynamic that's so negative that it's nearly impossible to settle on cooperation, added to the fact that the Communists see the Social Democrats as rivals for the loyalty of the working class. In terms of just statistical likelihood, a lot of experts at the time felt surely the German army is going to step in, and the most likely outcome would have been a German general shutting down the democracy and producing a military dictatorship. It says a lot about how dreadful and bloody the record of the Nazis was, that some people in retrospect would have felt that that military dictatorship would've been preferable, if it had obviated the need for the ordeal under the Nazis.

**Lex Fridman**

What do you think Marx would say about the 20th century? Let's take it before we get to Mao and China, just looking at the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's a really good question. I think that Marx was flexible in his expectations about tactics and strategies, even as he was sure that he had actually cracked a big intellectual problem of what the future's going to look like. So how it would play out, he was a man who had to deal with a lot of disappointments because in revolutionary uprising after revolutionary uprising, whether it was in the revolutions of 1848 across Europe, whether it was in Poland, whether it was in the Paris Commune, this is it. This is the outbreak of the real thing, and then it doesn't end up happening. So I think that he'd probably have tried to be patient about the turn of events. We mentioned at the outset that Marx felt it was unlikely that a workers' revolution would break out in the Russian Empire because for that you needed lots of industrial workers and they didn't have a lot of industry. There's a footnote to add there, and it proves his flexibility. A Russian socialist wrote to Marx asking, "Might it not be possible for Russia to escape some stages of capitalist development? I mean, do you have to rigidly follow that scheme?" And Marx's answer was convoluted, but it wasn't a no, and that suggests that Marx was willing to entertain all sorts of possible scenarios. I think he would certainly have been very surprised at the course of events as it unfolded because it didn't match his expectations at the outset.

**Lex Fridman**

Not to put this on him, but would he be okay with the price of [inaudible 02:30:02] for the utopian destination of communism? Meaning, is it okay to crack a few eggs to make an omelet?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, we don't know what Marx would say if he were posed that question deliberately, but we do know in the case of a Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, who was a prolific and celebrated British historian of the 19th and 20th centuries. And he was put this question in the '90s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he stated forthrightly that because the Soviet Union failed such sacrifices were inordinate. But if the experiment had succeeded and a glorious future had been open for mankind as a result of the Soviet Union's success, that would lead to a different reply. And that is one person's perspective.

**Lex Fridman**

So that takes us to the other side of the world. The side that's often in the West, not considered very much when we talk about human history, Chinese dynasties, empires, are fascinating, complex, and there's just a history that's not as deeply explored as it should be. And the same applies to the 20th century. So Chinese radicals founded the Chinese

Communist Party, CCP, in July 1921. Among them, as you talk about, was Mao. What was the story of Mao's rise to power?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

So Mao takes a page from the book of Lenin by adapting or seeking to adapt Marx's ideology to a context that would have surprised Marx significantly. And that is, not only to set the revolution in, an as yet, not industrialized country, but moreover to make the peasants, rather than being conservative sacks of potatoes, to make them into the prime movers of the success of this political venture. That's a case of the phenomenon that we talked about earlier. When is an adaptation of an ideology or a change to an ideology a valid adjustment that you've made or adaptation? And when is it already so different that it's something entirely distinct? Maoism was very clearly intended to answer this question for the Chinese context and, by implication, other non-Western parts of the world. This was, in part, Mao's way, whose ambition was great, to put himself at the head of a successful international movement and to be the successor to Stalin, whose role he both admired and resented, from having to be the junior partner. To take an example of a masterwork and a major milestone in the history of Communism, the Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, who was at first a committed Communist and then later became disillusioned and wrote a three-volume study of Marxist thought, called *Currents of Marxism*. In that book, when he reaches Maoism, Kolakowski essentially throws up his hands and says, "It's hardly you'd even know what to do with this," because putting the peasantry in the vanguard role is something that is already at variance with the original design. But Marx says this is an improved version. This is an adapted and truer version of Marxism for the Chinese context. In case after case in Mao's rise to power, we see a really complicated relationship with Stalin. He works hard to gain Stalin's support because The Common Front, the international organization headquartered in Moscow working to encourage and help revolutionaries worldwide, is skeptical about the Chinese Communists to begin with, and believes that China still has a long way to go before it's reached the stage where it's ripe for Communist revolution, and in a way that's more orthodox Marxism than what Mao is championing. Hey, that's more orthodox Marxism than what Mao is championing. Mao chafes under Stalin's acknowledged leadership of international communism as a movement. And in 1950, when Mao goes to visit Stalin in Moscow, in order to sign a treaty of cooperation, he's left waiting for days and days and days in a snub that is meant to show him that you're just not as important as you might think you are. And then when Stalin dies in 1953, Mao feels the moment is ready for him to step into the leadership position surpassing the Soviet Union. So many of Mao's actions like the Great Leap Forward and the agricultural disasters that follow from that are literally attempts to outdo Stalin, to outperform Stalin, to show that what Stalin was not able to do, the Chinese Communist regime will be able to bring off. And the toll for that hubris is vast.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah. In the darkest of ways, he did outdo Stalin.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. In the statistics.

**Lex Fridman**

The Great Leap Forward ended up killing approximately 40 million people from starvation or murder. Can you describe the Great Leap Forward?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

It was modeled on the crash industrialization that Stalin had wanted to undertake in the Soviet Union and to outdo it. The notion of the Great Leap Forward was that it would be possible for the peasant masses out of their conviction in the rightness of the Chinese Communist cause to industrialize China overnight. That involved things like creating small smelting furnaces in individual farm communes. It involved folding together farming territories into vast communes of very large size that were, just because of their sheer gigantism, supposed to be by definition more efficient than small-scale farming. It ended up producing environmental disasters and campaigns to eliminate birds or insects. Were supposed to demonstrate mastery over nature by sheer acts of will. These included things like adopting Soviet agricultural techniques that were pioneered by a crackpot biologist by the name of Trofim Lysenko that produced more agricultural disaster that involved things like plowing to depths that were not practical for the seeds to germinate and grow but were supposed to produce super plants that would produce bumper harvests and outpace the capitalist countries and the Soviet Union. So, the context for all of this is a race to get first to the achievement of full-scale communism. One of the themes that I think it's so valuable to pursue and to take seriously in the history of communism is what concrete promises were made. In the case of China, Mao made promises and projections for the future that were worrying even to some of his own assistants. He exclaimed that perhaps by 1961, perhaps by 1973, China would be the winner in this competition and it would've achieved full communism so that which Marx had sketched as the endpoint of humanity would be achieved first by the Chinese. Later, his own comrades, when he passed from the scene, felt the need to tamper that a little bit and promised that they would achieve full communism by the year 2000. Such promises are helpful to a regime to create enthusiasm and to hold out to people, the prospect of real successes just around the corner. But what happens when the date arrives and you haven't actually achieved that goal? That's one ticking time bomb that played a role in the increasing erosion of confidence in the Soviet Union and the case of China must have been something similar.

**Lex Fridman**

So there's a lot of other elements that are similar to the Soviet Union. Maybe you could speak to the Hundred Flowers Campaign.



**Vejas Liulevicius**

The Hundred Flowers Campaign is a chance for Mao who has felt that he has lost prestige and lost standing in the party because of the disasters of the Great Leap Forward to regain some of that momentum. And the whole Hundred Flowers Campaign officially titled The Rectification Campaign to set things right is still shrouded in mystery. Historians disagree about how to interpret what Mao was actually up to. The most cynical variant is that Mao encouraged Chinese thinkers and intellectuals to share ideas and to engage in constructive criticism, to propose alternatives, and to let a full discussion happen. And then after some of them had ventured that to come in and purge them, to punish them ruthlessly for having done what he had invited them to do. That is the most cynical variant. Some historians argue that Mao himself was not prepared for the ideas that he himself had invited into the public square and that he grew anxious and worried and angry at this without having thought this through in a cynical way to begin with. The end result is the same. The end result is once again negative selection. The decimation of those who are most venturesome, those who are most talented and intelligent are punished relentlessly for that.

**Lex Fridman**

And just a general culture of censorship and fear and all the same stuff we saw in the Soviet Union.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. I mean, think of the impact on officials who are loyal servants of the regime and just want to get along. The message goes out loud and clear. "Don't be venturesome, do not propose reforms. Stick with the tried and true and that'll be the safe route even if it ends in ultimately stagnation."

**Lex Fridman**

So, as the same question I asked about the Soviet Union, why do you think there was so much failure of policies that Mao implemented in China during his rule?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Mao himself had a view of human beings as being, as he put it, beautiful blank pieces of paper upon which one can write new characters. And that is clearly at variance with what you and I know about the complex nature of human beings as we actually encounter them in the world. I think that in the process of hatching schemes that were one-size-fits-all for a country as big and as varied in its communities as China, inevitably, such an imposition of one model was going to lead to serious malfunctions. And so much of what other episodes in Chinese history had showed the entrepreneurial capacity, the productive capacity economically of the Chinese people was suppressed by being fitted into these rigid schemes. What we've seen since, after Mao passes from the scene and with the forms of

Deng Xiaoping one sees just how much of those energies had been forcibly suppressed for so long and now we're allowed to re-emerge.

**Lex Fridman**

Mao died in 1976. You wrote that the CCP in '81, looking back through the lens of historical analysis, said that he was 70% correct. Seven zero, exactly, 70% correct.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah. Not 69, not 71.

**Lex Fridman**

Not 71. The scientific precision, I mean we should say that again and again. The co-opting of the authority of science by the Soviet Union, by Mao, by Nazi Germany, Nazi Science is terrifying and should serve as a reminder that science is the thing that is one of the most beautiful creations of humanity but is also a thing that could be used by politicians and dictators to do horrific things. And-

**Vejas Liulevicius**

His essence is questing, not certainty.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Constant questing.

**Lex Fridman**

Exactly. Humility, intellectual humility. So how did China evolve after Mao's death to today?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, I think that there is... Without denouncing Mao, without repudiating Mao's 70% correctness, the regime actually undertook a new venture. And that venture was to open up economically to gain access to world markets and to play a global role always with the proviso that the party retained political supremacy. It's been pointed out that while Khrushchev tries in the Soviet Union in 1956, especially with a secret speech in which he denounces Stalin's crimes, he tries to go back to the founders' intentions of Lenin. Nothing like that, it's argued, is possible in the Chinese case because Mao was not the equivalent of Stalin for communist China. Mao was the equivalent of Lenin. Mao was the founder. So there's no repudiating of him. They're stuck with that formula of 70% and acknowledging that there were some problems, but by and large, arguing that it was the correct stance of the party and its leader that was paramount. And the results of this wager are where we are today. China has been transformed out of all recognition in terms of not all of the living

standards of the country, but many places. Its economic growth has been dramatic and the new dispensation is such that people will ask, "Is this a communist country anymore?" And that's probably a question that haunts China's current leadership as well. With Chairman Xi, we've seen a return to earlier patterns, Xi insisting that Mao's achievement has to be held as equal to that of the reform period. Sometimes imitations or nostalgia for the Mao period or even the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution are part of this volatile mix. But all of this is outward appearance. Statistics can also be misleading, and I think that very much in question is China's further revolution in our own times.

### **Lex Fridman**

In the West, China is often demonized and we've talked extensively today about the atrocities that results from... Atrocities both internal and external that result from communist nations. But what can we say by way of hope to resist the demonization? How can we avoid cold or hot war with China, we being the West or the United States in the 21st century?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, you mentioned in the context of the claims of science, humility as a crucial attribute. I think that humility, sobriety, realism are tremendously valuable in trying to understand another society, another form of government. And so, I think one needs to be very self-aware that projection onto others of what we think they're about is no substitute for actual study of the sources that a society like that produces. It's declarations of what matters most to them, the leadership's own pronouncements about what the future holds. I think that matters a lot more than pious hopes or versions of being convinced that inevitably everyone will come to resemble us in a better future.

### **Lex Fridman**

You mentioned this earlier, but just to take a small detour, what are we supposed to think about North Korea and their declaration they're supposedly a communist nation? What can we say about the economic, the political system of North Korea? Or is it just a hopelessly simple answer, "This is a complete disaster of a totalitarian state?"

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

I think the answer that our historian can give is a historical answer that we have to inquire into what has to happen in order to arrive at the past we are today. Where you have a regime that's claiming to be communist or has an even better version of Marx's original ideas in the form of a Korean adaptation called Juche. How does that mesh with the reality that we're talking about a dynastic government and a monarchy in all but name, but a communist monarchy if that's what it is? I think that examining as much as we can learn about a closed society that goes about its every day in ways that are inscrutable to us is very, very challenging. But the only answer when an example like this escapes your analytic

categories, probably there's a problem with your analytical categories rather than the example being the problem in all its messiness.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah. So there's a component here and it relates to China as well to bring somebody like John Mearsheimer into the picture. There's a military component here too, and that is ultimately how these nations interact, especially totalitarian nations interact with the rest of the world. Nations interact economically, culturally, and militarily. And the concern with countries like North Korea is the way for them to be present on the world stage in the game of geopolitics is by flexing their military might and they invest a huge amount of their GDP into the military. So I guess the question there to discuss in terms of analysis is how do we deal with this kind of system that claims to be a communist system and what lessons can we take from history and apply it to that? Or should we simply just ignore and look the other way as we've been hoping it doesn't get out of hand?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Yeah. There's a realist's see states following their own interests and prioritizing their own security, and there's probably not much that could be done to change that. But conflict arising as a result of misunderstanding or mixed messages or misinterpretation, those are things that policymakers probably do have some control over. I think that there's internal processes that'll work their way out in even as opaque place as North Korea. It's also the reality, just as we saw with the divided Germanys, that it's a precarious kind of twinned existence when you have countries that are across the border from one another that are derived from what used to be a single unit that now are a real life social science experiment in, "What kind of regime do you get with one kind of system, what sort of regime you get with another kind of system?" And that's a very unstable setup as it turns out.

### **Lex Fridman**

Now let us jump continents and in the 20th century look to North America. So you also have lectured about communism in America, the different communist movements in America. It was also founded in 1919 and evolved throughout through a couple of red scares. So what was the evolution of the Communist Party and just in general communist in America?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

It's fascinating to observe this story because one longstanding commonplace had been that socialism has less purchase or radical socialism in the United States than in European countries. So, to the extent that that was true, it was an uphill battle for the communists to get established in the United States, but it makes it all the more interesting to follow the development of the movement. And there were two challenges in particular that played a role in shaping the American Communist experience. One was the fact that, to begin with, the party was often identified with immigrants. The communities that had come over across the Atlantic from Europe often had strong socialist contingents. And when this

break happens within the socialist movement between radical socialists and more moderate socialists, there were fiery individuals who saw the opportunity to help shape the American Communist movement. But the result was that, for many American workers, they saw the sheer ethnic variety and difference of this movement as something that was unfamiliar. It would only be with the rise to the leadership of the Communist Party of Earl Browder, a American-born political leader with vast ambitions for creating an American communist movement that that image would start to be modified. Earl Browder had a meteoric rise and then fall over the promise he made that went by the slogan Communism is 20th Century Americanism. The notion was that communism could find roots in American political discourse and experience. Where Earl Browder fell a foul of other communists was in his expectations during World War II, that it might be possible for the Soviet Union and the United States to make their current cooperation permanent and to come to some sort of accommodation that would moderate their rivalry. As it turns out, with the dawning already of Cold War tensions that would later flower more fully, that was unacceptable. And the movement divested itself of Earl Browder. Another point that shaped American perceptions of the communist movement in the United States involved issues of espionage. During the 1930s and the 1940s, American communists, not all of them obviously, but select members of the movement were called upon by Soviet intelligence to play a historical role by gathering information, winning sympathies... One of the most amazing books of the 20th century is the book written by Whitaker Chambers, who had served as a Soviet spy, first a committed communist, then a Soviet spy, and then later a renegade from those allegiances. His book is entitled Witness, published in 1952, and it's one of the most compelling books you could ever read because it's so full of both the unique character of the author in all of his idiosyncrasies and a sense of huge issues being at stake ones upon which the future of humanity turns. So, talk about the ethical element being of importance there. Through the apparatus of the state, the Soviets managed to infiltrate spies into America's military as well as government institutions. One great irony is that when Senator McCarthy in the '50s made vast claims about communist infiltration of the government apparatus, claims that he was unable to substantiate with details, that reality had actually been closer to the reality of the 1930s and the 1940s, than his own time. But the Association of American Communists with the foreign power of the Soviet Union and ultimately an adherence to its interests did a lot to undermine any kind of hearing for American communists. An example, of course, was the notorious Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. The American Communist Movement found itself forced to turn on a dime in its propaganda. Before the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, they had denounced Nazi Germany as the greatest threat to world peace. Just after the signing of the pact, they had to proclaim that this was a great win for peace and for human harmony and to completely change their earlier relationship of being mortal enemies with Nazi Germany. There were many American communists who couldn't stomach this and who in disillusionment simply quit their party memberships or drifted away. But it's a fascinating story of the ups and downs of a political movement with radical ambitions in American political history.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, the Cold War and the extensive levels of espionage, combined with Hollywood created basically firmly solidified communism as the enemy of the American ideal sort of embodied. And not even the economic policies of the political policies of communism, but like the word and the color red with the hammer and sickle, Rocky IV, one of my favorite movies–

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, that's canonical, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. I mean, it is a bit of a meme, but meme becomes reality and then enters politics and is used by politicians to do all kinds of name-calling. You have spoken eloquently about modern Russia and modern Ukraine and modern Eastern Europe. How did Russia evolve after Stalin and after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Well, I think the short answer is without a full historical reckoning that would've been healthy about the recent past in ways that's not very surprising because given the economic misery of dislocations and the cumulative damage of all of those previous decades of this experiment, it left precious little patience or leisure or surplus for introspection. But after an initial period of great interest in understanding the full measure of what Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union had undergone in this first initial explosion of journalism and of reporting and investigations, historical investigations with new sources, after an initial period marked by such interest, people instead retreated into the here and now and the today. And the result is that there's been less than would be healthy of a taking stock, a reckoning. Even in assigning of responsibility for those things that were experienced in the past, no Nuremberg trial took place in order to hold responsible those who had repressed others in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In other ex-communist countries, there was also precious little in the way of legal proceedings that would've established responsibility. And keep in mind, the Nuremberg trials had as one of their goals a very important one, as it turns out, not even individual verdicts for individual people found guilty, but to collect and publicize information, to create knowledge and transparency about what the reality had been in the past. In the case of the former Soviet Union, in the case of Russia today, instead of a clear-eyed recognition of the vast nature of what it all cost, Putin upon replacing Yeltsin was in a position to instead traffic in the most varied, eclectic, and often mutually contradictory historical memories or packages of memories. So on the one hand, in Putin's Russia, the Tsars are rehabilitated as heroes of Russian statehood. Putin sees Lenin in a negative light because Lenin by producing federalism as a model for the Soviet Union, laid a time bomb at the base of that state that eventually smashed it into many constituent parts as nations regained their independence. While Stalin, it's acknowledged exacted a dreadful toll, but also was effective as a representative of Russian

statehood. This produced where we are today. It's a commonplace echoed by many that Russia without Ukraine is a nation-state or could be a nation-state. Russia with Ukraine has to be an empire. Putin, who is not really seeking a revival of Stalin's rule, but still is nostalgic about earlier forms of greatness and of the strength of Russian statehood to the exclusion of other values has undertaken a course of aggression that has produced results quite different from what he likely expected. And I think that timing is crucial here. It's fascinating to try to imagine, "What if this attempt to re-digest Ukraine into an expanded Russian imperial territory had taken place earlier?" I think that the arrival on the scene of a new generation of Ukrainians has produced a very different dynamic and a disinclination for any kind of nostalgia for the past, packaged however it might be, and however nostalgic it might be made to appear. And there, I think that Putin's expectations in the invasion of 2022 were entirely overturned. His expectation was that Ukraine would be divided on this score and that some significant portion of Ukrainians would welcome- Some significant portion of Ukrainians would welcome the advance of Russian forces, and instead, there has been the most amazing and surprising heroic resistance that continues to this day.

**Lex Fridman**

It's interesting to consider timing and also individual leaders, Zelensky, you can imagine all kinds of other figures that would've folded much easier, and Zelensky, I think, surprised a lot of the world, this comedian, somehow becoming essentially an effective war president. So put that in the bin of singular figures that define history.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That surprises.

**Lex Fridman**

How do you hope the war in Ukraine ends?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I'm very pessimistic on this score actually, and for the reasons we just talked about how these things escape human management or even rationality. I think that war takes on a life of its own as accumulated suffering actually eliminates possible compromises or settlements that one might talk about in the abstract. I think that it's one thing for people far away to propose trades of territory or complicated guarantees or arrangements that sound very good in the abstract and that will just be refused by people who have actually experienced what the war has been like in person and what it has meant to them and their families and everyone they know in terms of lives destroyed. I think that peacemaking is going to face a very daunting task here, given all that's accumulated, and I think in particular, just from the last days of the launching of missile attacks against indiscriminate or civilian targets, that's not easy to turn the corner on.

**Lex Fridman**

Let me ask a political question. I recently talked to Donald Trump and he said if he's elected before he has sworn into office, he'll have a peace deal. What would a peace deal like that look like, and is it even possible, do you think? So we should mention that Russia has captured four regions of Ukraine now. Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson. Also, Ukraine captured part of the Kursk region within Russia. So just like you mentioned, territory is on the table. NATO, European Union is on the table. Also funding and military help from the United States directly to Ukraine is on the table. Do you think it's possible to have a fair deal that from people, like you said, far away where both people walk away, Zelensky and Putin, unhappy, but equally unhappy and peace is negotiated?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Equally unhappy is a very hard balance to strike probably. I think my concern is about the part of the equation that involves people just being desperately unhappy, laying the foundations for more trouble to come. I couldn't imagine what that looks like, but that's, once again, these are things that escape human control in the details.

**Lex Fridman**

Laying the foundation for worse things to come. So it's possible you have a ceasefire that lays the foundation for a worse warrant and suffering in a year, in five years, in 10 years.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

In a way, we may already be there because ratifying the use of force to change borders in Europe was a taboo since 1945 and now look where we are. If that is validated, then it sets up incentives for more of the same.

**Lex Fridman**

If you look at the 20th century is what we've been talking about with horrendous global wars that happened then, and you look at now, and it feels like just living in the moment, with the war in Ukraine breaking the contract of, you're not supposed to do territorial conquest anymore in the 21st century that then the just intensity of hatred and military tension in the Middle East with the Israel, Iran, Palestine, just building and then China calmly, but with a big stick, talking about Taiwan. Do you think a big conflict may be on the way? Do you think it's possible that another global war happens in the 21st century?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

I hope not, but I think so many predictions reach their expiration dates and get invalidated. Obviously, we're confronting a dire situation in the present.

**Lex Fridman**

As a historian, let me ask you for advice. What advice would you give on interviewing world leaders, whether it's people who are no longer here, some of the people we've been talking



about, Hitler, Stalin, Mao or people that are still here, Putin, Zelensky, Trump, Kamala Harris, Netanyahu, Xi Jinping. As a historian, is it possible to have an interesting conversation, maybe as a thought experiment? What kind of conversation would you like to have with Hitler in the 1930s or Stalin in the 1920s?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

First of all, I mean the answer's very clear. I would never presume to advise you about interviewing world leaders and prominent people because the roster that you've accumulated is just astonishing. But I know what I might aim for and that is, I think, in historical analysis, in trying to understand the role of a particular leader, the more one understands about their prior background and formative influences, the better a fix, I think, one gets on the question of what are their expectations? In German, there's a beautiful word for this. Germans managed to mash together several words into one even better word, and in German, it's Erwartungshorizont, the horizon of expectation. So in the case of figures like Churchill or Hitler, their experience of World War I shaped their actions in World War II. Their values were shaped in their childhood. Is there a way of engaging with someone you're interviewing even obliquely that gives a view in on their sense of what the future might hold? Obviously such people are expert at being guarded and not being pinned down, but the categories in which they're thinking a sense of what their own ethical grounding might be or their ethical code that gives hints to their behavior. It gets said, and again, it's a cliché because it's true, that one of the best measures of a person, especially a leader, is how they treat people from whom they don't expect anything. Are they condescending? Are they, on the contrary, fundamentally interested in another person, even if that person can't help them or be used in some way? Speaking of prominent world leaders to interview, there's Napoleon. Napoleon, psychologically, must have been a quite amazing person to make a bid for mastery of Europe and then already thinking about the mastery of the world. But contemporaries who met Napoleon said that it was very disturbing to talk with him because meeting with him one-on-one revealed that he could talk to you but look like he was looking right through you as if you were not fully real. You were more in the nature of a character on a chessboard, and for that reason, some of them called Napoleon, the master of the sightless stare. So if you're talking with a world leader and he or she has a sightless stare, that's probably a bad sign. But there might be other inadvertent clues or hints about the moral compass or the future expectations of a leader that emerge in one of your wonderful conversations.

### **Lex Fridman**

You put it brilliantly in several ways, but the moral compass getting sneaking up to the full nuance and complexity of the moral compass, and one of the ways of doing that is looking at the various horizons in time about their vision of the future. I imagine it's possible to get Hitler to talk about the future of the Third Reich and to see in ways what he actually visions that as, and similar with Stalin. But of course, funny enough, I believe those leaders would be easier to talk to because there's nothing to be afraid of in terms of political competition.

Modern leaders are a little bit more guarded because they have opposition often to contend with, and constituencies. You did a lot of amazing courses including for the great courses on the topic of communism. You just finished the third, so you did a series of lectures on the rise of communism, then communism and power, and then decline and fall...

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Decline of communism.

### **Lex Fridman**

When I was listening to these lectures, can't possibly imagine the amount of work that went into it. Can you just speak wisely? What was that journey like of taking everything your expertise on Eastern Europe, but just bringing your lens, your wisdom, your focus onto this topic and what it takes to actually bring it to life?

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Journey is probably just the right word because it's this week that the third of that trilogy, Decline of Communism, is being released. It felt like something that I very much wanted to do because the history that's narrated there is one that is so compelling and often so tragic that it needs to be shared. The vast amount of material that one can include is probably dwarfed by the amount that actually ends up on the cutting room floor. One could probably do an entire lecture course on every single one of those lecture topics that got broached. One of the great satisfactions of putting together a course like this is also being able to give further suggestions for study to the listeners and in some cases, to introduce them to neglected classics or books that make you want to grab somebody by the lapels and say, "You've got to read this." There's probably few things that are as exciting as a really keen and targeted reading recommendation. In addition, I've also done other courses on the history of World War I, on the diplomatic history of Europe from 1500 to the present, a course on the history of Eastern Europe, and also a course on dictatorships called Utopia and Terror, and then also a course on Explorers and a course on turning points in modern history. Every single one of those is so rewarding because you learn so much in the process and it's really fantastic.

### **Lex Fridman**

I should highly recommend that people sign up. First of all, this is the great courses where you can buy the courses individually, but I recommend people sign up for great courses plus, which I think is like a monthly membership where you get access to all these courses and they're just incredible. I recommend people watch all of yours. Since you mentioned books, this is an impossible question and I apologize ahead of time, but is there books you can recommend just in your own life that you've enjoyed, whether really small or some obvious recommendations that you recommend people read? It is a bit like asking what's your favorite band kind of thing.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. Would a book that got turned into a movie be acceptable as well?

**Lex Fridman**

Yes.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

In that case, all of us reflect on our own childhoods and that magical moment of a reading a book or seeing a movie that really got you launched on some particular set of things that you're going to find fascinating for the rest of your life. There's a direct line to the topics we were talking about today from myself in the Chicagoland area as a kid, seeing the film of Dr. Zhivago and then later reading the novel on which it was based by Pasternak. Even though the film had to be filmed on location in Spain pretending to be revolutionary Russia, it was magical for the sheer sweep and tragedy and human resilience that it showed the very way in which a work of literature or a cinematography could capture so much. I'm still amazed by that. There's also, in the spirit of recommending neglected classics, my favorite author, is now a late Canadian author by the name of Robertson Davies, who wrote novel after novel in a mode that probably would get called magical realism but is so much more. Robertson Davies was heavily influenced by Carl Jung and Jungian philosophy, but in literary form, he managed to create stories that blend the mythical, the mystical, and the brutally real to paint a picture of Canada as he knew it, Europe as he knew it, and the world as he knew it. He's most famous probably for the Deptford Trilogy, three novels in a series that are linked and they're just masterful if only there were more books like that.

**Lex Fridman**

The Deptford Trilogy, Fifth Business, the Manticore, World of Wonders, and you got a really nice beard.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Yes, it was an amazing beard, very 19th century.

**Lex Fridman**

Beautiful. What advice would you give to young people today that have just listened to us talk about the 20th century and the terrifying prospects of ideals implemented into reality? By the way, many of the revolutions are carried out by young people, and so the good and the bad and the ugly is thanks to the young people. So the young people listening today, what advice would you give them?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

It comes down to one word, and that one word is read. As a college teacher, I'm concerned about what I'm seeing unfolding before us, not my classes, but classes in which students are asked to read very little or maybe in some cases not at all, or snippets that they are

provided digitally. Those have their place and can be valuable, but the task of sitting down with a book and absorbing its message, not agreeing with it necessarily, but taking in the implications, learning how to think within the categories and the values of the author is going to be irreplaceable, and my anxiety is that with college bookstores now moving entirely to the paperless format, it changes how people interact with texts. If the result is not a renaissance and a resurgence of reading, but less reading, that will be dreadful because the experience of thinking your way into other people's minds that sustained reading offers is so crucial to human empathy, a broadening of your own sensibilities of what's possible, what's in the full range of being human, and then what are the best models for what has been thought and felt and how people have acted, otherwise, we fall prey to manipulators and the ability of artificial intelligence to give us versions of realities that never existed and never will, and like.

### **Lex Fridman**

It's a really interesting idea. So let me give a shout-out to Perplexity that I'm using here to summarize and take quick notes and get little snippets of stuff, which is extremely useful. But books are not just about information transfer, just as you said, it's a journey together with a set of ideas and it's a conversation, and getting a summary of the book is the cliché thing is it's really getting to the destination without the journey. The journey is the thing that's important, thinking through stuff. I've been surprised, I've learned, I've trained my brain to be able to get the same thing from audiobooks. Also, it's a little bit more difficult because you don't control the pacing. Sometimes pausing is nice, but you could still get it from audiobooks. So it's an audio version of books and that allows you to also go on a journey together and sometimes more convenient. You could take it to more places with you, but there is a magical thing. I also trying to train myself mostly to use Kindle, the digital version of books, but there is, unfortunately, still a magical thing about being there with the page.

### **Vejas Liulevicius**

Audiobooks are definitely not to be scorned because as people have pointed out, the original traditions of literature were oral. So that's actually the 1.0 version, and combining these things is probably the key. I think one of the things I find so wonderful about the best lectures that I've heard is it's a chance to hear someone thinking out loud, not laying down the law, but taking you through a series of logical moves, imaginative leaps, alternative suggestions, and that's much more than data transfer.

### **Lex Fridman**

The use case of AI as a companion as you read is really exciting to me. I've been using it recently to basically, as you read, you can have a conversation with a system that has access to a lot of things about a particular paragraph. I've been really surprised how my brain, when given some extra ideas, other recommendations of books, but also just a summary of other ideas from elsewhere in the universe that relates to this paragraph. It

sparks your imagination and thought, and you see the actual richness in the thing you're reading. Now, nobody, to my knowledge, has implemented a really intuitive interaction between AI and the text, unfortunately, partially because the books are protected under DRM, and so there's a wall where the AI can't access the thing. So if you want to play with that kind of thing, you have to break the law a little bit, which is not a good thing. But just like with music, Napster came up, people started illegally sharing music, and the answer to that was Spotify, which made the sharing of music revolutionized everything and made the sharing of music much easier. So there is some technological things that can enrich the experience of reading, but the actual painful, long process of reading is really useful. Just like boredom is useful.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right.

**Lex Fridman**

It's also called just sitting there.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Underrated Virtue.

**Lex Fridman**

Of course, you have to see the smartphone as an enemy, I would say, of that special time. You have to think because social media companies are maximized to get your engagement. They want to grab your attention, and they grab that attention by making you as braindead as possible and getting you to look at more and more and more things. So it's nice and fun and it's great. Recommend it highly. It's good for dopamine rush, but see it as a counter force to the process of sitting with an idea for a prolonged period of time, taking a journey through an expert eloquently conveying that idea and growing by having a conversation with that idea and a book is really, really powerful. So I agree with you totally. What gives you hope about the future of humanity? We've talked about the dark past, what gives you hope for the light at the end of the tunnel?

**Vejas Liulevicius**

We talked indeed about a lot of latent, really damaging and negative energies that are part of human nature. But I find hope in another aspect of human nature, and that is the sheer variety of human reactions to situations. The very fact that history is full of so many stories of amazing endurance, amazing resilience, the will to build up even after the horrors have passed, this, to me, is an inexhaustible source of optimism. There are some people who condemn cultural appropriation and say that borrowing from one culture to another is to be condemned or the problem is a synonym for cultural appropriation is world history. Trade, transfer of ideas, influences. Valuing that which is unlike your own culture is also a form of

appropriation, quite literally, and so that multitude of human reactions and the fact that our experiences so unlimited as history testifies, gives me great hope for the future.

**Lex Fridman**

The willingness of humans to explore all of that with curiosity. Even when the empires fall and the dreams are broken, we rise again.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

That's right. Unceasingly.

**Lex Fridman**

Vejas, thank you so much for your incredible work, your incredible lectures, your books, and thank you for talking today.

**Vejas Liulevicius**

Thank you for this such a fun chat.

**Lex Fridman**

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Vegas Liulevicius. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. Now let me leave you with some words from Karl Marx. "History repeats itself; first as a tragedy, second as a farce." Thank you for listening. I hope to see you next time.