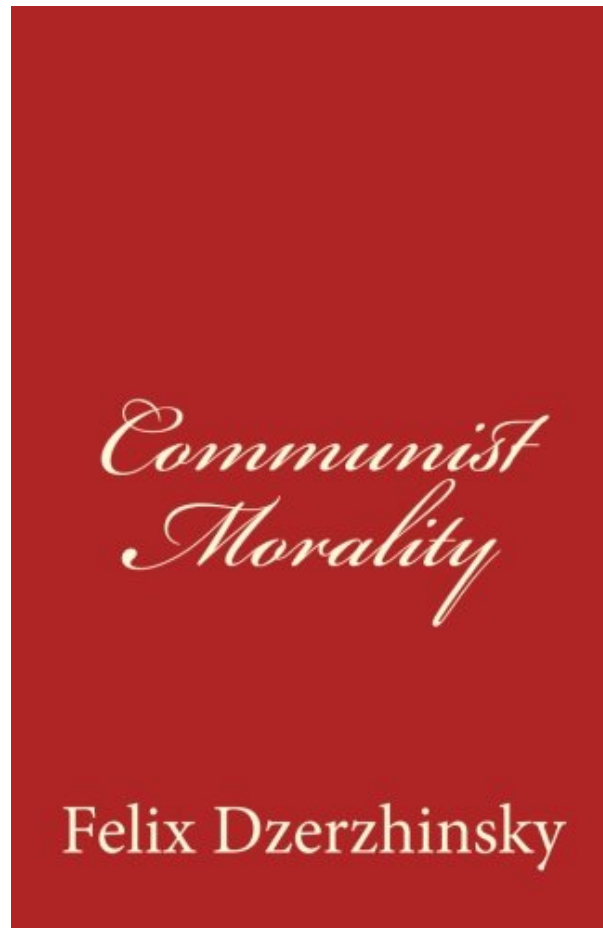


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Communist Morality

Felix Dzerzhinsky

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Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (1877 – 1926) was a Communist revolutionary, famous as the first director of the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka, known later by many names during the history of the Soviet Union. The agency became notorious for torture and mass summary executions, performed especially during the Red Terror and the Russian Civil War.

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"Iron Felix" Had An Ethics!?!

By Gunlover

Well.....sort of.

Felix Dzerzhinsky was a Polish-born Marxist revolutionary. As a young man he was active in the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party. Between 1897 and 1917, he was arrested several times and spent time in prison. In 1912, he was arrested in Warsaw and later sent to the notorious Moscow Butyrka Prison where he was kept in leg irons and brutally beaten by Czarist police.

During the February Revolution of 1917, Dzerzhinsky was released from prison by the working men of Moscow along with other political prisoners. He soon joined the Bolshevik party and was elected to the Executive Committee of the Moscow Soviet. Lenin soon recognized Dzerzhinsky's mettle and elevated him to director of the Cheka, the Soviet secret police. In this capacity, Dzerzhinsky oversaw the arrest, torture and mass executions of counterrevolutionaries during the Russian Civil War and the Red Terror. One of Iron Felix's more memorable quotes is his assertion that "We represent in ourselves organized terror - this must be said very clearly."

"Communist Morality" is basically a collection of fragments and aphorisms culled from his memoirs and letters to relatives. There is no systematic exposition of a Marxian ethical system. The passages are arranged in chronological order and dated between 1908 and 1924.

The most interesting thing to note from this collection is the hardening of Dzerzhinsky's attitudes toward his class enemies. His earlier writings discuss his love for children and his burning desire to end economic and political injustice. During the years he spent in prison, Dzerzhinsky never doubted the cause of socialism or faltered in his willingness to see capitalism destroyed. In one of the more moving passages from the book, he writes the following while in prison:

"When I think of all the misfortunes in life that lie in wait for a man, of the fact that a man is so often deprived of all he is most attached to, my thoughts again tell me that in life one has to love with all one's heart and soul that which is not transitory, that which cannot be taken away from a man...Love for suffering, oppressed mankind, the eternal longing in the heart of everyone for beauty and happiness, strength and harmony, urges us to seek a way out and to find salvation here, in life itself, and shows us the way out...[E]ach new misfortune is no longer a reason to withdraw from life..., but again and again inspires a man to go on living, to struggle and to love." (p. 16)

However, during the thick of the Red Terror, Dzerzhinsky was capable of producing prose like this:

"Wherever the scoundrel plants himself, he will be brought before the court of the Tribunal, whose punitive hammer will fall with all the devastating might and anger of which it is capable, for there is no mercy for the deadly enemies of our revival...The sternest punishment awaits them." (p.21)

One of the things I admire about Marxian theory is its lack of sentimentality toward history or its naive idealism. Noble ideals are fine, but they cannot be separated from real-world political and social contexts. While the Bolsheviks were brutal during the Russian Civil War, the fact remains that the White forces who opposed them were equally brutal and committed similar acts of violence against those who supported the Bolshevik government. So, in a nutshell, do noble ends justify violent means? This question in itself is idealistic hogwash. The fact is that the means are CONTAINED in the end. They cannot be separated. If the end is justified, then sometimes brutal measures are also justified for the sake of pursuing this end.

However, answers to these questions will not be found in "Communist Morality." One will find stirring calls to revolution and short passages of beautiful prose but little else. To explore further the ethical justifications behind Marxian thought I recommend both Trotsky's excellent *Their Morals and Ours* and *Marxist Ethics: A Short Exposition* by Willis Truitt.

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