

JEFF JACOBY

Communist chic

ON JANUARY 2005, Britain's Prince Harry attended a birthday party dressed as a Nazi. When the London Sun published a picture of the prince in his German desert uniform and swastika armband, it triggered widespread outrage and disgust. In scathing editorials, Harry was condemned as an ignorant and insensitive clod. Months later, he was still apologizing for his tasteless costume. "It was a very stupid thing to do," he said in September. "I've learnt my lesson."

For a more recent example of totalitarian fashion, consider Tim Vincent, the New York correspondent for NBC's entertainment newsmagazine "Access Hollywood." Twice in the last few weeks, Vincent has introduced stories about upcoming movies while sporting an open jacket over a bright red T-shirt — in which, clearly outlined in gold, was a large red star and a hammer-and-sickle: the international emblems of totalitarian communism.

And what was the public reaction to seeing *those* icons of cruelty and death turned into the latest yuppie style? Was there a moral outrage? Elistering editorials?

None of the above.

Never. "hammer and sickle"

into a shopping search engine, and up pop dozens of products adorned with the Marxist brand — T-shirts and ski caps, bracelet charms and keychains, posters of Lenin and "Soviet Kremlin Stainless Steel Flasks."

The glamorization of communism is widespread. On West 4th Street in Manhattan, the popular KGB Bar is known for its literary readings and Soviet propaganda

Where is the moral outrage as icons of cruelty and death become the latest fashion?

posters. In Los Angeles, the La La Ling boutique sells baby clothing emblazoned with the face of Che Guevara. Fidel Castro's notorious henchman. At the House of Mao, a popular eatery in Singapore, waiters in Chinese army uniforms serve Long March Chicken, and a giant picture of Mao Zedong dominates one wall.

What can explain such "communist chic?" How can people who wouldn't dream of drinking in a pub called Gestapo cheerfully hang out at the KGB Bar? If the swastika is an undisputed symbol of unspeakable evil, can the hammer-and-sickle and other emblems of communism be

anything less?

Between 1933 and 1945, Adolf Hitler's Nazis slaughtered some 21 million people, but the communist nightmare has lasted far longer and its death toll is far, far higher.

Since 1917, communist regimes have sent more than 100 million victims to their graves — and in places like North Korea, the deaths continue to this day. The historian R.J. Rummel, an expert

on genocide and government mass murder, estimates that the Soviet Union alone annihilated nearly 62 million people: "Old and young, healthy and sick, men and women, even infants and the infirm, were killed in cold blood. They were not combatants in civil war or rebellions; they were not criminals. Indeed, nearly all were guilty of . . . nothing."

Yet communism rarely evokes the instinctive loathing that Nazism does. Prince Harry's swastika was way over the line, but Tim Vincent's hammer-and-sickle was kitschy and cool. Why?

Several reasons suggest themselves. One is that in the war to defeat Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union fought with the Allies. World War II eventually gave way to the long-drawn Cold War, but America's alliance with Moscow left in

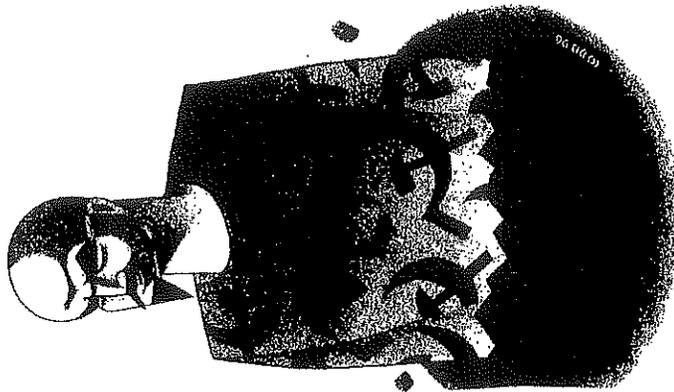
munist movements typically masked their ruthlessness with appealing talk of peace, equality, and an end to exploitation. Partly as a result, the myth persists to this day that communism is really a noble system that has never been properly implemented.

Third, the excesses of Joseph McCarthy hurt honest anticommunism. In the backlash to McCarthyism, many journalists and intellectuals came to dismiss any strong stand against the communists as "Red baiting," and conscientious liberals found it increasingly difficult to take a vocal anti-Soviet stand.

But perhaps the strongest explanation is the simplest: visibility. Ever since the end of World War II, when photographers entered the death camps and recorded what they found, the world has had indelible images of the Nazi crimes. But no army ever liberated the Soviet Gulag or halted the Maoist massacres. If there are photos or films of those atrocities, few of us have ever seen them. The victims of communism have tended to be invisible — and suffering that isn't seen is suffering most people don't think about.

"Communist chic?" The blood of 100 million victims cries out from the ground. To wear the symbols of their killers is no fashion statement, but the ultimate in bad taste.

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many minds the belief that when it counted most, the communists were on our side.

Moreover, the Nazis didn't camouflage their hatefulness.

Their rhetoric made only too clear that they loathed Jews and other "subhumans" and believed an Aryan master race was destined to rule all others. By contrast, our