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Totalitarian Troubadour

We shouldn't forget that Pete Seeger was Communism's pied piper.

By John Fund

For some liberals, there really are no adversaries to their left. President Obama's statement Tuesday on the death of folk singer Pete Seeger at age 94 was remarkable. Seeger was a talented singer, but he was also an unrepentant Stalinist until 1995, when he finally apologized for "following the [Communist] party line so slavishly." You'd think Obama might have at least acknowledged (as even Seeger did) the error of his ways. Instead, Obama celebrated him only as a hero who tried to "move this country closer to the America he knew we could be."

"Over the years, Pete used his voice — and his hammer — to strike blows for worker's rights and civil rights; world peace and environmental conservation," said Obama. "We will always be grateful to Pete Seeger." Not even a hint that the "world peace" Seeger was seeking was one that would have been dominated by the Soviet Union.

I found Seeger a highly talented musician who raised American folk music to a new standard. But, as with other artists — the Nazi-era filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and the fascist poet Ezra Pound — an asterisk must be placed beside their names for their service in behalf of an evil cause.

Time magazine's [obituary of Seeger](#) was entitled: "Why Pete Seeger Mattered: The Pied Piper of the People's Music."

Recall that the original Pied Piper lured away the children of an entire town. They disappeared into a cave and were never seen again. When Seeger sang "If I Had a Hammer," what he really meant was "If I Had a Hammer and Sickle."

As historian Ronald Radosh wrote: "Seeger would sing and give his support to peace rallies and marches covertly sponsored by the Soviet Union and its Western front groups and dupes — while leaving his political criticism only for the United States and its defensive actions during the Cold War." Radosh, an admirer and onetime banjo student of Seeger's, says he is grateful Seeger ultimately acknowledged the crimes of Stalin.

Fair enough, but it's not enough to say, as liberal blogger Mike O'Hare wrote, that Seeger "was wrong 'for the right reasons' (ignorance and misplaced hope, not bloody-mindedness or cruelty), and in the days he got Stalin wrong, a lot of good people did the same."

Actually, the vast majority didn't, and we shouldn't forget those who did. The late John P. Roche, who served as president of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action in the 1960s and was a speechwriter for Hubert Humphrey, once told me that the success American Communists had in the 1930s by wrapping their ideology in the trappings of American traditions had to be remembered. "If authoritarianism of the right or left ever comes to America it will come surrounded by patriotism and show business," he told me. "It will be made fashionable by talented people like Pete Seeger."

Roche vividly recalled how American Stalinists suddenly flipped on the issue of Nazi Germany after the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 brought the two former adversaries together. "Stalinists acclaimed this treaty as the high point of 20th century diplomacy," Roche wrote in 1979. He vividly recalled "the laudatory speech" that the future congresswoman Bella Abzug gave in support of the pact at Hunter College in 1940.

The next year, Pete Seeger, a member of the Young Communist League, lent his support for the effort to stop America from going to war to fight the Nazis. The Communist-party line at the time was that the war between Britain and Germany was "phony" and a mere pretext for big American corporations to get Hitler to attack Soviet Russia. The album Seeger and his fellow Almanac Singers, an early folk-music group, released was called "Songs for John Doe." Its songs opposed the military draft and other policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

*Franklin D, listen to me,
You ain't a-gonna send me 'cross the sea.
You may say it's for defense
That kinda talk ain't got no sense.*

Just one month after the album was released, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The album was quickly withdrawn from circulation, and Seeger and his buddies immediately did a 180-degree turn and came up with new songs:

*Now, Mr. President
You're commander-in-chief of our armed forces
The ships and the planes and the tanks and the horses
I guess you know best just where I can fight . . .
So what I want is you to give me a gun
So we can hurry up and get the job done!*

Seeger may have formally left the Communist party in 1949, but for decades afterward he would still identify himself as "communist with a small c."

We can honor Seeger the singer and mourn his passing. But at the same time we should respect the power that popular culture has over people and warn against its misuse. The late Andrew

Breitbart lived largely to remind us that culture is upstream of politics — our culture is a stream of influence flowing into our politics.

Pete Seeger aimed to change both our culture and our politics. Howard Husock wrote at NRO this week that he “was America’s most successful Communist.”

I recall interviewing East German dissidents in 1989 who were still angry at Seeger and Kris Kristofferson for the concerts they did on behalf of the Communist regime that built the Berlin Wall. He was hailed in the pages of *Neues Deutschland*, the Communist-party newspaper in East Berlin, as “the Karl Marx of the teenagers.”

By all means, let’s remember Pete Seeger for his talent while also remembering the monstrous causes he sometimes served.

— *John Fund is a national-affairs columnist for NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE.*