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communism

Communism is an international political movement and a political and economic system that has its origins in the philosophy of Karl Marx. Also referred to as Marxism, it is a socialist philosophy that calls for an international revolt of workers against capitalism to bring about a workers' utopia. Communism has split into various ideologies, including the Marxist-Leninist philosophy behind the founding of the Soviet Union and the Maoist philosophy that served as the basis for the revolution in China. The Soviet Union was long the leader of the communist world. Now, the only remaining communist major power is the People's Republic of China, though some smaller nations maintain communist systems.

The term communism originated among secret revolutionary groups in Paris in the 1830s and referred both to a political movement of the working class in a capitalist society and to a projected form of society that would come into existence after the workers came to power through class struggle. Marx and Friedrich Engels brought these ideas to a wider audience in 1848 when they published a pamphlet called the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx did not invent the idea of communism, but he did give it new meaning. In a communist society, the community owns political and economic power, and the wealth is distributed among the people according to need. Marx went one step further. He said that communism was destined to take over the nations of the world based on his reading of history, and he called for the "workers of the world to unite" to overthrow their capitalistic enslavement. Marx's following was small at first but grew as the 19th century progressed.

In 1917, one of Marx's most ardent admirers, Vladimir Lenin, led a group of revolutionaries called the Bolsheviks in overthrowing the existing monarchy in Russia, establishing in its place the world's first communist government. Communism as a form of government remained confined to the Soviet Union until after World War II. With Germany's defeat, Eastern Europe fell under the control of the Soviets, and the leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Joseph Stalin, moved swiftly to establish communist rule in East Germany, Poland, Romania, and other countries in what came to be known in the West as the eastern bloc.

In 1949, the world's most populous state, China, also joined the ranks of communist states in a revolution led by Mao Zedong. Other prominent countries also became communist at around this same time, most notably North Korea in 1948 and Cuba in 1959. Much as Marx predicted, communism seemed destined to take over the world, or so many feared in the West. By the mid-1980s, however, the idealism of the communist movement was beginning to fray, and the many flaws of state-centered communism were emerging, particularly in the communist world leader, the Soviet Union.

After determinedly competing with the United States in the Cold War for nearly four decades, the Soviet Union's communist system was in crisis by the 1980s. Under three former leaders, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko, the country's economy had stagnated, with defense spending consuming approximately 25% of the gross national product. In addition, many people in the scholarly community rebelled against the Soviets' strict control over free expression and began calling for greater political and personal freedom. To solve this crisis, the Communist Party turned to ambitious reformer Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power as Soviet premier in 1985.

Gorbachev came from a younger generation, and Communist leaders hoped that he could lead the country out of its malaise. He instituted two reform campaigns. The first was based around the idea of glasnost ("openness") and was designed to give the Soviet people more freedom of expression. While it did allow more freedom of the press and speech and relieved some of the more oppressive aspects of communist society, it also gave voice to those who were highly critical of the government and to the Soviet republics that resented Russian dominance of the Soviet system. Glasnost allowed feelings of nationalism and independence to be voiced. Glasnost also allowed some of the gross atrocities that were committed under Stalin to come to light and exposed the truly repressive nature of the Soviet Communist Party. Up to this point, the government had tightly controlled freedoms. With glasnost, however, Gorbachev essentially removed the cap from the bottle and showed the communist system for what it was. Communism, at least the Soviet brand, had not produced the glorious, utopian society owned by the working class that Marx had predicted. Instead, the system had become corrupt, stagnant, and repressive, with only a precious few elite in the government and bureaucracy enjoying the fruits of the Soviet peoples' labors while the rest of the population toiled away in poverty and despair.

Gorbachev's second reform was called perestroika ("restructuring"). With this campaign, Gorbachev hoped to restructure the government and the economy so that it would be more productive and break the cycle of stagnation that began under Brezhnev. Gorbachev's hope was that the Soviet economy could be as productive as the Western economies. The problem with this reform was that Gorbachev never really defined what the program should be. Although instructed by his economic team that he must turn to a market-driven economy instead of the communist, government-driven one of the Soviet Union, he could never bring himself to commit to that reform, as Gorbachev was at heart a devoted communist himself. Although he initiated some half-measures, he never embraced the major reforms necessary to implement such dramatic change to Soviet society.

By 1990, the situation in the Soviet Union had become even more critical, as Gorbachev and his government began to lose control of the nation. Communist hardliners had always questioned Gorbachev's reforms, and now even those who had supported Gorbachev in the 1980s began to question his leadership. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin, a former member of Gorbachev's inner circle, began to gain popularity, becoming president of the Russian Parliament in 1989. Following a referendum from Gorbachev on the future of the Soviet state, Yeltsin was elected president of Russia in 1990 and declared sovereignty for Russia. From there, the dominos began to tumble. In 1991, the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia declared that they were going secede from the Soviet Union. Gorbachev tried to repress this secession, but Yeltsin, backed by the Baltic states, compelled Gorbachev to give way, which further hampered his credibility.

In an effort to stop the decline of the Soviet Union, Communist Party hardliners staged a coup d'état against Gorbachev in August 1991, which proved poorly planned and failed miserably. Yeltsin played a key role in preventing the coup from succeeding, and the failure of the Communist Party's last stab to hold onto power signaled the end of the Soviet Union.

On December 21, 1991, the Soviet Union formally dissolved when Russia and 10 former Soviet republics declared their independence. Much of the military might of the former Soviet Union came under the control of the new Russian Federation, with Yeltsin as its leader. Like Gorbachev before him, Yeltsin also initiated major reforms, setting out to transform the communist economic system to a market economy. Such a transition has been difficult, to say the least. Throughout the 1990s, Russia was beset by huge financial problems as it tried to transform itself from a communist, state-centered system to a market-driven, capitalist system. When the communist system collapsed, so did government control and the rule of law. Many officials in the Communist Party who were in positions of power grabbed control of such key resources as the banking system and utilities.

These officials set themselves up as the new economic powers in Russia, once again controlling the country's wealth, only this time under the guise of capitalism. These new Russian economic powers have come to be known as the "oligarchs." Because of the collapse of law, these people were not prosecuted for seizing control of businesses and resources or for the suspected widespread corruption that marks their business dealings. For instance, much of the monies loaned by the International Monetary Fund to assist Russia in its transition from communism to a more capitalistic system have disappeared, with many international officials suspecting that the oligarchs are responsible. Corruption and the lack of law and order have been rampant in Russia since the end of the Soviet Union.

To further complicate matters, Russia was beset by such economic and fiscal problems as enormous inflation. In addition, under the communist system, the government provided many social services for the people. With the collapse of the system, universal health care and government housing also collapsed. The Russian people, who historically have never lived under a free-market system, were unprepared for life without a strong central power directing resources. With no experience of capitalism, the Russian people have found it difficult to adapt to a free-market economy. These economic problems only served to undermine Yeltsin's initial popularity.

As the 1990s progressed, Russia continued to experience further economic and political problems. Yeltsin's health deteriorated, so that at times the country looked leaderless. In 1998, the ruble (Russia's currency) collapsed, deepening the economic crisis and leading to skyrocketing inflation. With the poor performance of the Russian economy and Yeltsin's fragile health, the communists made a bit of a comeback in Russia. Yeltsin resigned in December 1999 and named Vladimir Putin—a former KGB officer (the Soviet secret police) in the old Soviet Union—his successor. Putin was elected in his own right in March 2000. It remains to be seen how Putin will lead the country, although analysts affirm that Russia's return to a purely communist state is highly unlikely. Too many changes to Russian society have taken place since 1991 for a reinstatement of the old regime. Putin has vowed to crack down on the oligarchs and return Russia to glory and stability. Whether that means a return to a more state-controlled path or the establishment of a more market-driven economy with similar political freedoms is unclear at this point.

With the decline of communism in Russia, the world has begun to focus more attention on the remaining communist countries, primarily Cuba, North Korea, and China. With the Cuban Revolution, communism was established in Cuba in 1958 by Fidel Castro, who continues to rule the country today. Castro quickly aligned Cuba with the Soviet Union, abolished capitalism, nationalized foreign-owned enterprises, and instituted many Soviet-style agrarian and industrial measures. The Cuban economy and politics became directed from the central government. Political freedom and expression were curtailed just as they were in the Soviet Union. Everything from the media to health care came under the control of the state.

Cuba's ruling party is the Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba), and it is the only legal political party. One of the chief benefits of a communist system is the social programs that are provided. Medical care is free, as is education. Health conditions are actually very good as the infant mortality rate is low, and the average life expectancy is more than 74 years of age. Still, these benefits come with a lack of political, social, and economic freedoms.

From its inception through today, the Cuban economy has been stagnant and heavily dependent on Soviet subsidies. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union severely wounded Cuba politically and economically and basically isolated Castro's regime. Frequent shortages of

consumer goods continue to plague the country and threaten to wreck economic chaos on Cuba.

Despite what many consider its past success, the future of Cuba's communist regime is uncertain. The country remains isolated and is the only communist regime in the Western Hemisphere. The United States refuses to lift its trade embargo with Cuba, which puts significant strains on the country's economy. The people of Cuba remain loyal to Castro, but he is aging. When he is gone, the communist legacy may too pass for Cuba.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in 1948. Kim Il Sung became the first premier and ruled the country with great control and personality for decades. Today, North Korea remains communist and is one of the most isolated and inaccessible countries in the world. Relations with the United States and South Korea are very strained, particularly as North Korea has spent much of its resources in a massive military build-up over the past several years.

North Korea is a highly centralized communist regime with a Stalinist dictatorship. The country is ruled by the Korean Workers' Party secretary-general. Just like Cuba and other communist states, the Communist Party leadership controls the country's economy and politics. Political, social, and economic freedoms are severely limited. Just as the collapse of the Soviet Union isolated Cuba, so did it isolate the North Koreans. China remains North Korea's sole major ally, but even that relationship is strained as China established diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992. The country's social services are strong with good medical care, free education, and other government services, but again these services come at the cost of many freedoms.

The future of North Korea is uncertain, and even today, limited information is available. The country is isolated and maintains strict restrictions on travel, press, and ideology. Reports of rampant food shortages and starvation surfaced in the late 1990s but have not seemed to have shaken the hold of the communists on the country. It remains one of the last strongholds of the communist system and forms part of a powerful communist bloc with its neighbor, China.

China remains the world's largest communist nation, a position it held even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The communist government was founded in 1948 under the leadership of Mao. Despite the country's enormous size, power and control still emanates from the central leadership. The Chinese Communist Party dominates both the government and the country's politics. No other political associations or parties are permitted that are independent of the party or the government. In terms of function, the Communist Party dictates policy, with the government assuming responsibility of carrying out those policies. Often times, this distinction and division has blurred, especially when officials of the party intervene in the government's day-to-day operations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that on issues of economics, defense, propaganda, social affairs, and culture, it is the party that leads the state.

Initially, communist China was largely an enigma to the West. Relations between the United States and communist China were not established until the presidency of Richard Nixon in the early 1970s. From the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, China began to "open the door" to the West and the international community as a whole. The country's security forces eased the level of political suppression and persecution, and the Chinese economy began a transition away from a Soviet style economy toward more of a market-driven economy, a development encouraged by the West and spurred on by Western influence. Still, the transition has been far from total, and its success remains questionable. Energy and transport needs still hamper the economy. Also, the transition to more of an open society stalled in the 1990s, especially after protests for more democratic freedom erupted in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre, international

relations, especially with the United States, became particularly strained and have remained that way, despite moves in the late 1990s to improve trade relations between the two countries.

China remains very much a communist state, despite its economic and social reforms. All such major social programs as health and education are run by the state, but more stories of political suppression and persecution continue to emerge from political dissidents and defectors. China looks to be the strongest of the remaining communist countries today.

Communism remains as a system of government and as an ideological force in the world today, but its viability and vitality have waned. As the world became smaller in the late 20th century because of enhanced communications and technological innovation, the veil of secrecy and control that held many communist systems together collapsed. Nowhere was this collapse more evident than in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, remaining communist systems tightened controls to ward off potential threats from the Western democracies. Still, more and more people in the remaining communist countries are becoming aware of the greater freedoms and higher standard of living in the majority of the capitalist countries of the world. It may be just a matter of time until communism really becomes simply another chapter in human history.

Further Reading

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Entry ID: 309346

"communism." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2015. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.