

How Communism Works <http://people.howstuffworks.com/communism.htm>



Russian revolutionaries and leaders Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin at the Congress of the Russian Communist Party.

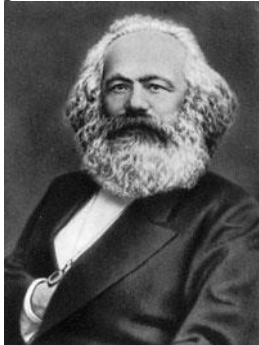
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In a perfect world, everyone would have food and shelter, and a true utopian society would be devoid of sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. But for most of the world's population, this perfect society just isn't possible. **Communism** is one proposed solution to these problems.

Most people know what communism is at its most basic level. Simply put, communism is the idea that everyone in a given society receives equal shares of the benefits derived from labor. Communism is designed to allow the poor to rise up and attain financial and social status equal to that of the middle-class landowners. In order for everyone to achieve equality, wealth is redistributed so that the members of the upper class are brought down to the same financial and social level as the middle class. Communism also requires that all means of production be controlled by the state. In other words, no one can own his or her own business or produce his or her own goods because the state owns everything.

According to the philosopher **Frederick Engels'** "Principles of Communism," the plan for ultimate financial and social equality is built on the principle that the system should spread around the world until all countries are on board [source: Engels]. This central goal has caused capitalist nations to keep their guards up, fearing that communist economic practices might spread to their countries.

Who are communists, and why do non-communist cultures consider them radical? Does communism work in practice? Next, we'll take a look at the father of communism.



Karl Marx, the father of communism

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The political theory of socialism, which gave rise to communism, had been around for hundreds of years by the time a German philosopher named **Karl Marx** put pen to paper. Marx, also known as the father of communism, spent most of his life in exile in Great Britain and France. He wrote the **Communist Manifesto** in 1848, which later served as the inspiration for the formation of the Communist Party. Communism is also known as "Marxism."

Marx believed that a truly utopian society must be classless and stateless. (It should be noted that Marx died well before any of his theories were put to the test.) Marx's main idea was simple: Free the lower class from poverty and give the poor a fighting chance. How he believed it should be accomplished, however, was another story. In order to

liberate the lower class, Marx believed that the government would have to control all means of production so that no one could outdo anyone else by making more money. Unfortunately, that proves to this day to be more difficult than he might have realized.

Marx described three necessary phases toward achieving his idea of utopia.

- Phase 1: A revolution must take place in order to overthrow the existing government. Marx emphasized the need for total destruction of the existing system in order to move on to Phase 2.
- Phase 2: A dictator or elite leader (or leaders) must gain absolute control over the proletariat. During this phase, the new government exerts absolute control over the common citizen's personal choices -- including his or her education, religion, employment and even marriage. **Collectivization** of property and wealth must also take place.
- Phase 3: Achievement of utopia. This phase has never been attained because it requires that all non-communists be destroyed in order for the Communist Party to achieve supreme equality. In a Marxist utopia, everyone would happily share property and wealth, free from the restrictions that class-based systems require. The government would control all means of production so that the one-class system would remain constant, with no possibility of any middle class citizens rising back to the top. (You can see the full text of the manifesto at this Web site.)

Marx also detailed the 10 essential tenets of communism, namely:

- Central banking system
- Government controlled education
- Government controlled labor
- Government ownership of transportation and communication vehicles
- Government ownership of agricultural means and factories
- Total abolition of private property
- Property rights confiscation
- Heavy income tax on everyone
- Elimination of rights of inheritance
- Regional planning

In the communist society that Marx described, the government has supreme authority through its total control of land and means of production. Because the government distributes land and property among the people, communism sets a standard of equality -- both economically and socially -- among its followers.

The system seems to work in theory, but how did communism work in practice? Read on to learn about the rise of the first communist nation.

Communism-related Terms

- **Socialism:** A system that advocates the state's ownership of land, industry and capital. Communism is a branch of socialism.
- **Capitalism:** Economic system in which individuals or corporations own land and means of production
- **Bourgeois:** The middle-class/upper-class, or the owners of land and means of production
- **Proletariat:** The working-class
- **Kulak:** Wealthy peasants
- **Bolsheviks/Bolshevists:** Russian word for "majority." Also, the political party that spawned the [Bolshevik Revolution](#), effectively introducing communism in Russia
- **Mensheviks:** By definition, "minority," although this Russian party had many more supporters than the Bolsheviks when Lenin returned to Russia in 1917.
- **Reds:** Communist/Bolshevik supporters. Also, "red" is a derogatory term to describe communists.
- **Whites:** Those opposed to the Bolshevik regime's takeover
- **Gulags:** Russian slave labor camps
- **Utopia:** A perfect place, in reference to social, moral and political issues.

Rise of the First Communist Nation

Russia was a **czarist** nation when the philosophies of communism started to take hold. For centuries, Russia was ruled by a monarchy that wielded absolute power over the people: the **Romanov Dynasty**. Czar Nicholas II and his wife resisted the shift toward democracy that much of the world was making. The members of Russia's lower classes had long suffered in poverty. These two factors, combined with the huge losses suffered during World War I, made the czar very unpopular. In addition, he and his family were living in luxury while their subjects struggled for basic necessities [source: First World War].

By February 1917, the war had taken a massive toll on Russia -- both in the loss of human lives and in the form of a severe nationwide famine. When a metalworking plant closed, resulting in the loss of many jobs, strikes and protests broke out. Russia was in a state of chaos. The army was sent in to control the situation, but many of the soldiers sympathized with the workers and defected, choosing to support them instead. As many as 150,000 soldiers joined the massive protest -- which is now known as the **February Revolution**.

The situation went downhill so fast that the military lost control completely. With virtually no support from the military, **Czar Nicholas II** was forced to abdicate his throne. The **Russian Provisional Government** was set up to take his place, effectively ending the Romanov Dynasty. In July 1918, the Bolsheviks assassinated the czar and his family.

In the next section, we'll learn how Vladimir Lenin orchestrated the Communist Party's uprising.

After Marx: Other Communist Leaders

Dictators have been the driving force behind communism, even from the very beginning. Some of the more influential communist dictators include:

- Vladimir Ilich Lenin: Although Marx is considered the father of communism, Lenin is the one who put his theories into practice, effectively turning Russia from a czarist nation to a communist one. Lenin ruled Russia from 1917 until his death in 1924.
- Joseph Stalin: As Lenin's extremely powerful successor, Stalin took communism to new heights when he governed the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1953.
- Mao Zedong: Mao founded the communist movement in China and ruled the country for more than 25 years until his death in 1976.
- Ho Chi Minh: Once a covert agent for Moscow, Ho Chi Minh is credited with spreading communism to Vietnam. A devoted follower of Stalin, he is probably best known for his guerilla warfare tactics.
- Kim Il-sung: Father of North Korea's current leader, Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung worked closely with the Soviet Union and China to spread communism. North Korea has always remained very isolated from the rest of the world, often causing panic over the country's nuclear capabilities.
- Fidel Castro: Castro resigned as president of Cuba on Feb. 19, 2008, concluding a nearly 50-year reign. Castro and his revolutionaries overtook the country in 1959 and began a Marxist communist government. Thus, Cuba became the Western Hemisphere's inaugural communist state. Power has really been in the hands of Castro's brother Raul since 2006, when Castro's health began to wane. Raul succeeded his brother as dictator in 2008 [source: New York Times].