

## Communism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A History

Communism is a political theory focusing on the redistribution of political, economic, and social power to collective ownership by the people and the state. Although other authors had explored similar ideas, the primary theorist of communism was the German political theorist Karl Marx, along with his co-author and editor Friedrich Engels, who released the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

Marx argued that the history of economics was the history of class oppression. Under feudalism, this took the form of the aristocracy exploiting serfs; under capitalism, this was capitalists, such as factory owners, disproportionately profiting off the labor of their employees. Marx argued that under capitalism, there were fundamentally two classes: the proletariat, or the exploited workers, and the “bourgeoisie,” the middle and upper classes who owned property and exploited the proletariat. With few exceptions, Marx held, these classes were fundamentally fixed and antagonistic; capitalism’s idea of mutually beneficial voluntary transactions was a farce.

The only solution, Marx held, was for private property, but especially “the means of production” – farms, factories, etc. – to be collectively owned by the people, thereby eliminating the very existence of different classes. All political and social power would be centrally organized; thus, communism also required supervision of the family, the abolition of religion, and other related institutions.

Achieving this would obviously require revolution, even violent revolution. Moreover, unlike the old idea of nations, which might have fixed borders, like French revolutionary theory before it communist theory required expansion over the entire world.

Although Marx had expected that communism would prove more appealing to urban societies, the turmoil of World War I enabled the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and his allies to overthrow first the Russian monarchy and then, after an especially brutal civil war, the short-lived Russian Republic. Lenin had updated Marxist thought, in particularly developing the idea that the advance of communism would require a vanguard of educated ideologues to educate the proletariat and supervise the transition to their dictatorship.

As the leader of this vanguard, Lenin ruled Russia. The transition to a collective economy proved financially ruinous, and Lenin, at least in the short term, relaxed it somewhat, though he considered the widespread starvation and violence acceptable short-term costs to achieving his ends. Lenin suppressed newspapers, banned art that did not contribute to socialism, and material no longer deemed “politically correct” was similarly censored or revised to maintain consistency with the party.<sup>1</sup> It was a period of [“dictatorship ruled by decree, enforced with terror.”](#)<sup>2</sup>

Lenin, like his successor Joseph Stalin after Lenin’s death in 1924, readily denounced even recent allies as enemies of the revolution no better than the old aristocrats, constantly purging the potentially disloyal or political threatening, often with the aid of secret police. Some were sent to prison camps called “gulags,” while others were executed after perfunctory trials. Many

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#secr>

were infamously even removed from photos in order to avoid questions about why these individuals were once close with Lenin, Stalin, or other still faithful revolutionaries.

Lenin's successor was Joseph Stalin, who quickly consolidated power, eliminating even many of Lenin's old allies, such as Leon Trotsky, whom many had suspected would be Lenin's successor. (Trotsky was initially exiled, though subsequently murdered, which many believe was on Stalin's orders). Like Lenin, Stalin was comfortable with violence and death as necessary to achieve the success of the revolution. Stalin moved to aggressively collectivize farmland, killing farmers who resisted, especially those demonized as "kulaks."

In 1932 and 1933, roughly 5 million people died in Ukraine alone due to a combination of declining yields and Soviet policies demanding increased production for and contribution to the rest of the Soviet Union, even if the farmers growing it themselves were starving. The exact balance of causes is fiercely debated: many historians label this the *Holodomor* and argue it was largely a conscious decision to starve and crush the spirit of the often rebellious area, whereas defenders of the Soviet Union attribute the death toll to incompetence and the difficulty of the economic transition. (The Soviet Union, with the cooperation of much of the western press, especially the *New York Times's* Walter Duranty, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, long covered up or suppressed reports of the appalling conditions.)

The so-called Great Terror of the mid- to late-1930s saw a renewed period of mass arrests and executions of possible dissenters. By late 1939, Stalin, aided by allies such as Lavrenti Beria, could effectively rule unchallenged for the rest of his life.

Although Stalin, unlike the more expansionist Lenin or Trotsky, preferred to prioritize consolidating the revolution within the Soviet Union, he too expanded the domain of communism. Stalin made a pact with Nazi Germany to divide Poland between them, invading Poland from the east shortly after Germany did from the west at the start of World War II. The Nazis and Soviets moved to eliminate possible sources of resistance in their territories. For the Soviets, this meant deporting the Polish elites, largely but not exclusively the military, the intellectual classes, and the police, to prison camps. They subsequently executed over 20,000 of them at the Katyn Massacres.

Soon after, Hitler betrayed Stalin, invading the Soviet Union as well. This led the USSR to switch sides to the Allies for the duration of the war. At the war's end, the Soviet Union did not free the people in the former Nazi territory it had captured, but created Soviet-aligned client governments there. In Germany, the Soviets erected a wall bisecting Berlin, which came to be a symbol not just of divided Germany but of Soviet domination. The Soviet puppet states of Eastern Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Albania were soon folded into the Soviet-controlled treaty known as the Warsaw Pact.

The always fragile alliance between the West and the Soviet Union broke down almost immediately. Although some wanted the United States, especially as the sole country armed with nuclear weapons, to challenge the Soviet Union militarily, President Roosevelt feared dragging the country into further conflict. Instead, after Roosevelt's death, the former Allies oversaw the creation of the NATO alliance to deter communist expansion. The so-called Cold War began, one which in America would be waged by Democrats and Republicans alike, such as Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan.

The stakes rose considerably when, in 1949, the Soviet Union tested its own atomic weapons, aided by infiltration of the American government, especially its nuclear program; this

incentivized both sides to avoid direct conflict and instead engage in proxy wars, such as Korea and Vietnam, as they battled to keep countries in either the “First World” of free countries or the “Second World” of communist ones.

In 1949, China’s civil war, paused by both sides to fend off the invading Japanese, concluded with victory by the Communists, with the defeated Nationalists fleeing to the island of Taiwan. Under Mao Zedong’s rule of more than thirty years, communist China attempted to similarly collectivize and modernize its society as had the Soviets three decades before. Between the Cultural Revolution, which sought to consolidate power and suppress political and cultural dissent, and the Great Leap Forward, which sought to modernize China’s economy at massive cost, historians estimate that tens of millions of Chinese died (the numbers vary wildly).

Mao’s admiration for Stalin did not apply to his successors, and eventually China grew more distant from the Soviet Union, both politically and economically. Under Mao’s successors, especially Deng Xiaoping, China reincorporated elements of market economics while preserving the security and political apparatus that enabled the ruling Communist Party to maintain its control over the country.

The Soviet Union’s economic struggles became increasingly challenging during the 1980s. Reformers, most notably Mikhail Gorbachev, sought to make some concessions to enable the regime to survive, but these did not succeed. In 1989, the government stood down as protestors destroyed the Berlin Wall, the symbol of Soviet dominance, signaling an end to Soviet domination of Germany. In 1991, the Soviet Union itself dissolved.