



## The Elements of Communism ■ ■ ■

COMMUNISM IS A POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC system in which the government is based on a collective society with land, property, and economic activities controlled by the state. It was originally conceived as a way to improve the lives and opportunities of the poor. Communism is the opposite of free-market capitalism. Communists believe that the basis for inequality in the world is class struggle: the wealthy class (commonly referred to as the “bourgeoisie”) attempts to exploit the working poor (the “proletariat”). The ultimate goal of communism is to create a society in which everyone is equal and there are no social or economic classes. In order to eliminate the class struggle, the proletariat has to rise up against the bourgeoisie and remove that group’s economic and political power. The term communism was first used in 1840 by the English writer John Goodwyn Barmby to describe French groups endeavoring to overthrow their government and create a classless society.

The ideals of communism were never achieved. Writing in the 1960s, the scholar Robert Daniels noted that “Communism is grounded in illusion.” Many of the basic components of the original system were altered and revised by regimes during the twentieth century. As a result, there has never been a true communist government, only a succession of regimes that claimed to be communist and that incorporated some aspects of the ideology into political or economic policies. In addition, many communist governments used the basic ideas of the political theory as an excuse to centralize political and economic resources, and to suppress dissent. For instance, all communist governments only allowed one political party,

the national Communist Party, to have any real political power. Some regimes did allow other political parties to exist, but they were actually controlled by the state and existed mainly for propaganda value.

Most communist regimes have ruled countries that historically have a large poor population. Communist governments usually come to power following a revolution in which the existing political and social order is overthrown. Examples of this trend include Russia, China, and Cuba. Communism claims to enhance the quality of life of the poorest of the poor. When communists come to power, the accumulated wealth and land of the bourgeoisie is expropriated by the regime and used to improve the lives and status of the proletariat through new social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, many communist regimes were installed as the result of conquest. The states of Eastern Europe had communist governments put in place either directly by the Soviet Union, or through Soviet support, in the aftermath of World War II. No communist government ever came to power as the result of free and fair elections. Instead, these regimes were installed by force either through internal revolutions or outside conquest.

Communism was a common form of government throughout most of the twentieth century. By the mid-1980s, one-third of the world's people lived under this form of government. However, by the twenty-first century, only a small number of communist countries survived, representing less than one-quarter of the population. The decline of communism was caused by governments' inability to achieve the ideals of the system and tendency to become totalitarian regimes.

### **THE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNISM**

Communist governments usually claim to be based on five main principles, although no regime ever successfully implemented the principles. First, the government owns all businesses and controls the economy. For example, factories are not owned by private citizens or corporations, but are the property of the state. Workers are employed directly by the government, which determines wages, products, and services, as well as production levels. This also means that the government usually decides the occupation of workers based on the skills of the individual and needs of society at the time. The government also oversees all long-range economic planning. Common among

communist regimes are five- and ten-year economic plans that set specific targets for economic growth, the production of commodities and products, and wages. Therefore, the economy operates on the basis of government goals rather than consumer preferences or the law of supply and demand. These plans lead to economies that are highly rigid and often unable to react to change, caused by economic problems such as drought or famine or societal shifts such as sudden increases or decreases in population.

Second, there is no real estate. Instead, land is owned by the government, which is supposed to ensure that any benefits or profits from the land are distributed equally throughout society. For instance, in communist countries, there are no individual or family farms; instead, people work in large agricultural units known as collective farms. The profits from the crops and livestock produced on these collectives are taken by the government to help pay for services such as health care and education. Also, because there is no private land, there is no right of inheritance. Most people live in their homes under lifetime leases. When they die, the government takes control of their homes. No private property also means that people typically do not own their homes or apartments. Instead they pay rent or have housing provided free.

Third, government control of wages creates, again only in theory, a classless society in which there are no rich or poor. Instead, everyone is more or less equal in political, social, and economic terms. In the United States and most Western industrialized countries, society is often described as consisting of three classes: the rich, the middle class, and the poor. Ideally, the middle class is the largest segment of the population. However, in many communist countries, the poor are the largest segment of the population, easily outnumbering the rich and middle class combined. For example, in Russia before the Revolution in 1917, the combined rich and middle class made up less than 10 percent of the total population. Communists say that capitalist societies have only two classes: rich and poor, or bourgeoisie and proletariat. They combine the rich and middle class into one category. In order for communism to be implemented, the bourgeoisie have to be eliminated. The result would be a classless society in which everyone is equal since the wealth of the bourgeoisie would be redistributed to the poor.

Fourth, social welfare benefits, such as education, health care, and retirement pensions, are available to all citizens free of charge. During the twentieth century, communist states claimed some of the highest literacy rates in the world. In addition, these regimes usually had highly developed and well-funded medical systems (this was especially true of the communist states of Eastern Europe). Nonetheless, medical care was often below the quality standard in Western Europe or the United States. This was especially true for women and marginalized groups in society.

Fifth, all contemporary communist governments are totalitarian regimes that limit political expression and dissent. Communist states also tend to abolish or limit religion and religious practices in order to prevent alternative beliefs from competing with communist ideology. Governments typically justify such repression on the grounds that alternative political ideologies would slow the development of a classless society. One result of this trend in the twentieth century was longstanding conflict with the noncommunist world. Western governments, including the United States, initially refused to recognize the communist governments in countries such as the Soviet Union and China. Communist governments openly asserted a goal of world domination in order to finally achieve a truly classless world society.

### **MARXISM**

Forms of communism have been around throughout human history. Modern communism is based on the political and economic theories of Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century German intellectual. He wrote several books with his friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels, which formed the foundation for communism. Both Marx and Engels were socialists; they believed that private property caused inequality in society and that governments should control their nation's economy so that the basic needs of people could be satisfied. During the Industrial Revolution in Europe, there were great disparities between the rich and poor. Factory owners and merchants grew very rich because the use of machinery to make new products and provide services reduced the value of workers. Machines did more work

and replaced the labor that had been provided by people. Over time, there were more workers than jobs. Owners and managers began to pay their employees less because it was easy to replace them. The result was widespread poverty, even among workers. This group of working poor lived mainly in the cities and were referred to as the working class. While the working class lived in squalor and poverty, business owners and investors grew richer because machines meant that it cost less to make their products. Marx and Engels sought to develop a political ideology that would reduce poverty and inequality. The result was communism, an egalitarian political and economic system.

The communist governments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are loosely based on Marxism, which combines the main principles of communist government with Marx's own sweeping and complex vision of history. Marx believed that history was marked by constant strife and class warfare. He based his theory on the work of German philosopher George W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel argued that every idea (the "thesis") was immediately challenged by its opposite (the "antithesis"). For instance, Christianity was challenged by atheism. Eventually, the two opposing concepts would blend into a combination known as the synthesis. However, that synthesis would then be challenged by its opposite and reignite the conflict between thesis and antithesis. Hegel termed this conflict of ideas as the dialectic.

Marx used Hegel's concept of the dialectic but added his own twist: he argued that the conflict between the bourgeoisie (the thesis) and the proletariat (the antithesis) could produce a final synthesis in the form of a perfectly classless egalitarian society. This society could only be achieved following a workers' revolution that would dislodge the existing power structure. Such a conflict would occur only in countries that were industrialized with wide gaps between the rich and poor. Marxists tend to focus on the existence of class warfare and the need for revolution. One of the main flaws of Marx's work is that he did not develop a formal governmental system. Instead, most of his writing dealt with the theoretical causes of class conflict and the need for revolution. Later intellectual figures would fill in the gaps in Marxist ideology.

Karl Marx is commonly referred to as the “father” of communism. Marx was born on May 5, 1818, in Trier, Germany, to a Jewish family. Marx’s father, a lawyer, later converted to Lutheranism since Jews were not allowed to practice law in Germany at the time. An intelligent and gifted youth, Marx earned a doctorate from the University of Jena in 1841. He became well-known for his opposition to the aristocracy and his promotion of political equality. Marx was appointed editor of a radical antigovernment journal after graduation. He married in 1843, but he and his family were forced to leave Germany after the government suspended publication of the journal. Marx moved to Paris, where he began to collaborate with his lifelong friend Friedrich Engels. Because of his revolutionary ideas, Marx was banished from France in 1845 and moved to Brussels, Belgium.

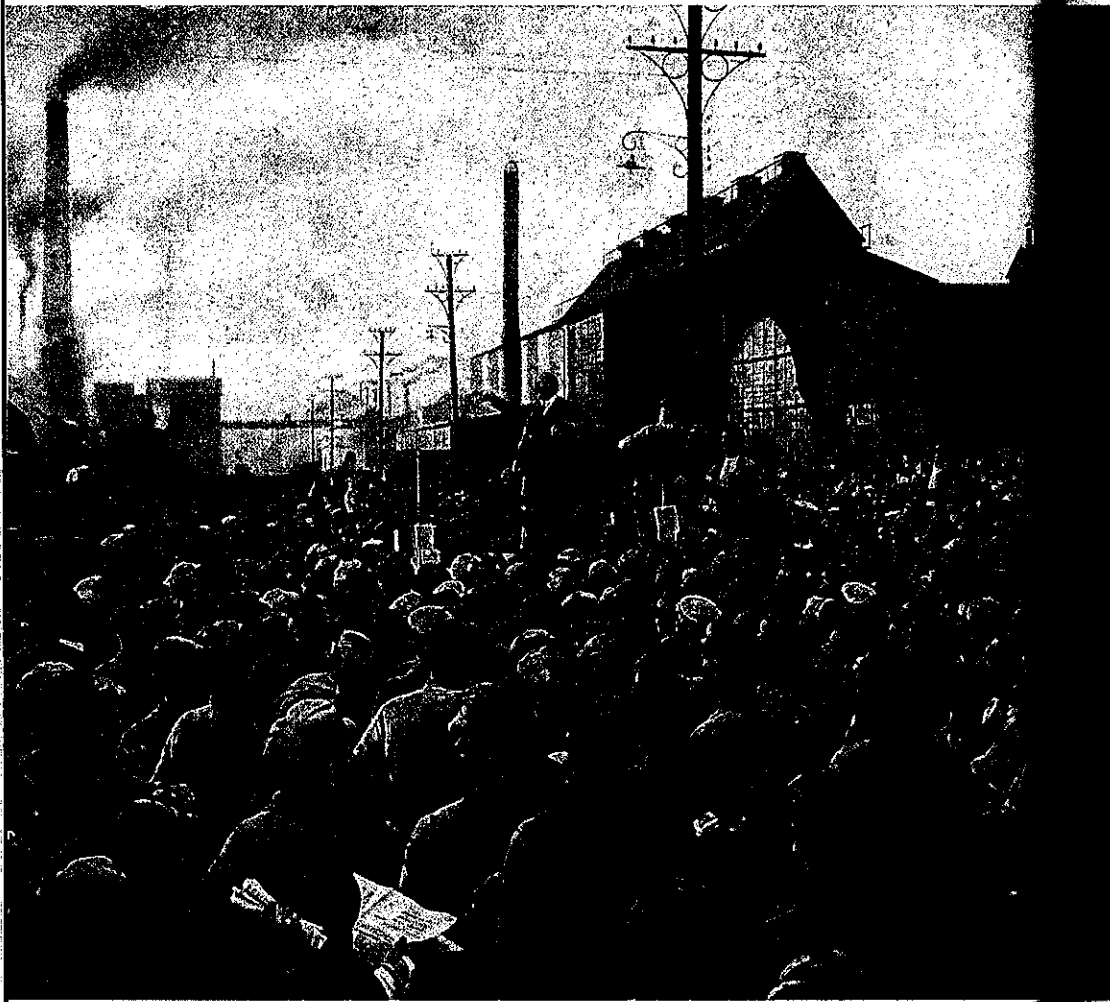
In 1847, Marx and Engels established the Communist League. In 1848, they wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, one of the earliest works about communism. In that short piece, Marx and Engels advocated the use of violence to implement their ideals. This led to Marx’s exile from Belgium. He and his family settled in London, where he remained for the rest of his life. Marx helped found the International Working Men’s Association (the First International) in 1864. This group sought to unite all workers to overthrow the existing economic system and replace it with a socialist system. While in London, Marx also worked strenuously on his magnum opus, *The Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (commonly known by its German title, *Das Kapital*). While the majority of the ideas and work in *Das Kapital* are Marx’s, he died on March 14, 1883, before the manuscript was complete. Engels finished and edited the two-volume work which presented Marx’s ideology, known as Marxism, and became the basis for modern communism.

### *Marxism-Leninism*

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924) led the communist revolution that took power in Russia in 1917. Lenin translated Marx’s theories into a governing system that came to be known as Marxism-Leninism. For instance, Marx predicted that worker revolutions would sweep through Europe, but by 1900 this had not occurred. Lenin claimed that imperialism delayed the onset of revolution because countries were able to exploit poorer countries to aid their economies and keep prices down. Workers were satisfied and their quality of life actually improved due to inexpensive imported goods. Lenin further asserted that large international corporations within the imperialist countries formed monopolies on certain products or services and then divided the world economy between them. These monopolies actually eliminated competition within the international economy and Lenin correctly predicted they would ultimately lead to higher prices and less choice. Lenin’s interpretation of imperialism differed from Marx’s. He argued that communist revolutions were most likely to occur in the developing world and not in the industrial societies of Western Europe because of the relatively high standard of living of those countries. Lenin believed that as revolutions were successful in the developing world, they would spread to the richer countries. Like Marx, though, Lenin argued that communism could only be successful if it spread across the globe.

Lenin also believed that communism could only succeed if the government was controlled by a single Communist Party. This nondemocratic regime, known as the dictatorship of the proletariat, would serve as a transition from the old, capitalist system to the eventual classless, egalitarian society. In between, society would have to be governed by an oligarchy that consisted of high-ranking members of the Communist Party. Once in power in Russia, Lenin ruthlessly suppressed dissent and worked to spread communism to surrounding countries. After the revolution, the former parts of the Russian empire were joined together to create the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or Soviet Union, a federation of states under the control of the new Russian capital.

Lenin’s successor, Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), further refined communist ideology into a system known as Stalinism. Stalin slowly eliminated rivals within the Communist Party through a series of



Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was the first communist leader of the Soviet Union. Here he speaks to a group of workers in Petrograd in 1917.

purges. In the 1930s, some 35,000 Soviet military officers were killed so they would not pose a threat to Stalin's reign and as a warning to any future challengers. In addition, while Lenin had allowed some flexibility in economic planning, Stalin ordered the forced collectivization of farms. The result was a massive famine that resulted in an estimated five to six million deaths. By the late 1930s, Stalin had replaced the party oligarchy with a personal dictatorship. Later Soviet leaders rejected many of Stalin's actions and political control again came to rest on a party oligarchy. Examples of Marxist-Leninist states include the former Soviet Union and the former communist states of Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Hungary, and East Germany. Most of the remaining contemporary communist states, such as Cuba and North Korea, combine Marxism-Leninism with the second main variation of communism: Maoism.

#### *Maoism*

The Chinese developed their own form of Marxism, which has come to be known as Maoism, after the first Chinese communist leader, Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Mao combined elements of traditional Chinese culture, including Confucianism, with Marxism. Mao imbued his brand of communism with Chinese nationalism, especially hatred of the colonial powers such as the Europeans and the Japanese who had carved China into spheres of influence. He also sought to develop a “united front” of people from all social classes so that the Chinese communist revolution was not simply a proletarian revolt. Mao's interpretation of Marxism is formally known as “Mao Zedong Thought” and remains the official basis for Chinese communism. Mao communicated his theories through the publication of a short book, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*. The pocket-sized edition was known in the West as *Chairman Mao's Little Red Book*. The book had quotations and sayings from Mao.

Unlike Marxism-Leninism, Maoism contends that the revolution to overthrow the bourgeoisie can be led by rural peasants and other segments of society (the united front) rather than the proletariat. Mao's ideas were rooted in the Chinese reality in which peasants had installed the communist regime. Mao believed in the importance of organization and saw communist revolutions evolving in stages. Initially, small groups of communists needed to be organized to fight an unconventional insurgency or guerrilla war. Over time, the