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An Introduction to Communism

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Communism is a political and social theory initially developed by the economist Karl Marx. Communism explores how goods and resources should be distributed in a society. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney further explores the political theory and the countries that have adopted it. As you read, take notes on how the countries that adopted communism were impacted by this system.

What is Communism?

- [1] Communism is a political and social idea about how a society could be organized. In simple terms, it is an idea that envisions¹ a society, or group of people, where almost everything is shared equally. Decisions are made for the good of the whole group, not just for certain individuals. A truly communist society has never existed on a large scale, but the idea of communism has been around for over 150 years.



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The opposite of communism is capitalism. In a capitalist society people are responsible for themselves; they earn their own money, and individuals are not expected to share unless they want to. Land, property, and goods are not equally shared. This leads to what is called a division of wealth between the rich and the poor, because some people, like movies stars for example, earn more money than others. Of course, in a capitalist society, there is not just the rich and the poor, but different groups of people between these two extremes with different levels of wealth. These different groups are known as social classes. The U.S. is a capitalist society with social classes.

In theory, communism is a society without any social classes. Property is owned by the community, and people share the same economic status. No one earns more than anyone else.

1. **Envision** (*verb*) to imagine as a possibility

Karl Marx and the Idea of Communism

The most important communist thinker was Karl Marx. In 1848, Karl Marx, along with his colleague Friedrich Engels, wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. This short book laid out the beliefs of communism.

- [5] Marx argued that all of history could be explained as a struggle between social classes. In the book, Marx and Engels wrote that each society was owned or controlled by a small group of people who controlled the means of production (how things are made). This group was known as the ruling class, or bourgeoisie. The book stated that the bourgeoisie used everyone else — the majority working class, or proletariat — for cheap labor and for their own profits. The working class, though they were in the majority, didn't get to own or control much.

Marx wanted the whole world to become communist, and he predicted that the working class would start a revolution and overthrow the ruling class. After winning the revolution, the working class would then spread the wealth equally, and a communist society would be created in which everyone acted for the greater good. The idea of the communist revolution is one of the most important ideas in *The Communist Manifesto*.

The First Communist Society: The Russian Revolution

For 70 years, *The Communist Manifesto* remained just a book and an idea. Then, in 1917, communism took hold in Russia. Working class people had been moving to cities to work in factories, but living and working conditions were poor. They began to feel like the upper classes were oppressing² them. It is not surprising, then, that a communist political party began growing in popularity.

The revolution that took place in Russia 1917 was chaotic. Revolutionaries took over the government in February, and then in October, a subgroup of revolutionaries known as the Bolsheviks took power. Over the next several years, a series of civil wars broke out. Finally, in 1922, the communist party firmly established its authority and formed the first communist country: the Soviet Union.

When Joseph Stalin took power in 1924, he quickly became a brutal dictator.³ He was suspicious of anyone who questioned communism or his authority as the country's leader, and ordered that political dissenters⁴ were executed. Those he did not kill were sent to Gulags, extremely harsh forced labor camps.⁵ Scholars estimate at least 4 million people died at Stalin's order

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2. **Oppress (verb)** to treat a person, or group of people, in a cruel or unfair way
 3. a ruler with total power over a country, typically one who took that power by force
 4. people who don't agree with something that others have accepted as official policy

during his 30 years of leadership.

- [10] In keeping with communist ideas, Stalin tried to centralize⁶ Soviet agriculture in the 1930s. The state took control of most crops, and when farm owners resisted, they were executed. A terrible famine⁷ spread throughout the Soviet Union in 1932 because the state chose to store and sell crops to foreign countries instead of providing food to the people. This is just one example of the Soviet leaders taking advantage of what seemed like a communist plan to help everyone.

The Soviet Union remained communist and tried to expand communism to other parts of the world — until it collapsed in 1991. Its economy never caught up to the progress of capitalist economies (like in the United States), and anywhere from 8 million to 60 million people died.

Communism in China

Communism took hold in China for similar reasons — people wanted to better their lives and felt oppressed by the classes above them. The communist political party started in 1921, but China did not become a communist nation until 1949 when Mao Zedong took power. Like Joseph Stalin, Mao cracked down on political dissent and ruthlessly held onto power.

After Mao's death in 1976, Chinese leaders wanted to keep the communist system of government while modernizing China's economy. Since the 1970s, China's economy has continued to develop and has become extremely competitive on the world stage, but its government remains quasi-communist,⁸ and political dissenters are still oppressed. Overall, communism in China killed at least 60 million people.

Is there communism today?

Communist countries still exist today, although each system looks different. China remains communist; other communist countries are Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam. Most of these places do not claim to be fully communist yet — instead, their constitutions explain they are slowly transitioning from capitalism to a purer form of communism that has yet to exist in the world so far.

- [15] North Korea is often in the news, and many Americans would consider it communist. However, it is actually a highly-centralized socialist⁹ state. It does have many characteristics similar to

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5. a prison camp where people are forced to do physical labor
 6. to bring control of an activity or organization under a single authority
 7. extreme lack of food
 8. "Quasi" means almost something, but not completely the thing described.

China and the Soviet Union, including a powerful dictator, a single political party, and widespread oppression of and violence against political dissenters.

No Such Thing as Pure Communism

In both the Soviet Union and China, communism as an idea gained popularity because people felt unappreciated and oppressed in their current living conditions. Communism promised hope for the future and equality with the people who ignored them or took advantage of them.

However, every actual attempt at communism so far has led to the rise of powerful dictators, mass killings, and even more extreme poverty.¹⁰ The communist leaders we read about today (like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong) did not create the ideal communist society in which everyone was equal and shared goods and resources equally. Instead, they used their positions of great authority to oppress others and boost themselves up. A true communist society, like the one Karl Marx envisioned, has never really existed.

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9. a political and economic theory that supports the idea that production, distribution, and exchange should be controlled by the community as a whole
 10. the state of being extremely poor

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. By fulfilling Karl Marx's true vision of communism, citizens and their economy would no doubt thrive.
 - B. Communism has been used to increase a leader's power and keep the lower class in powerless positions.
 - C. While communism and capitalism have both proved to be imperfect systems, both have provided people with power.
 - D. Modern communist countries have proven that it is impossible to provide every citizen with equal goods and resources.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Of course, in a capitalist society, there is not just the rich and the poor, but different groups of people between these two extremes with different levels of wealth." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "After winning the revolution, the working class would then spread the wealth equally, and a communist society would be created where everyone acted for the greater good." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Its economy never caught up to the progress of capitalist economies (like in the United States), and anywhere from 8 million to 60 million people died." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "However, every actual attempt at communism so far has led to the rise of powerful dictators, mass killings, and even more extreme poverty." (Paragraph 17)

3. Which of the following describes how communism is introduced in the text?
 - A. It is defined and compared to capitalism.
 - B. It is described as a potentially successful system.
 - C. It is described as causing mass deaths and poverty.
 - D. It is defined and described as superior to capitalism.

4. PART A: Which of the following describes the author's point of view on communism?
- A. The author believes that communism could be beneficial to societies if it were applied correctly.
 - B. The author believes that communism has been abused and has brought about more harm than good.
 - C. The author believes that there is no worse political or economic system than communism.
 - D. The author believes that additional countries will transition to communism in the near future.
5. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "A truly communist society has never existed on a large scale, but the idea of communism has been around for over 150 years." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "The book stated that the bourgeoisie used everyone else — the majority working class, or proletariat — for cheap labor and for their own profits." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Communism took hold in China for similar reasons — people wanted to better their lives and felt oppressed by the classes above them." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "The communist leaders we read about today (like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong) did not create the ideal communist society in which everyone was equal and shared goods and resources equally." (Paragraph 17)
6. How does the author illustrate that communism has been largely unsuccessful in the countries that have adopted it?

4. In what ways could communism offer security to citizens of the countries that practice it? On the other hand, how does communism infringe on an individual's rights? Do you think that if implemented as Karl Marx intended, communism could provide security and freedom? Why or why not?