

# Revolution, Socialism, and Global Conflict

## The Rise and Fall of World Communism

1917–PRESENT

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An upstanding Soviet citizen entered a medical clinic one day and asked to see an ear-and-eye doctor. Asked about his problem, the man replied: “Well, I keep hearing one thing and seeing another.”

A Frenchman, an Englishman, and a Soviet Russian are admiring a painting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Frenchman says, “They must be French; they’re naked and they’re eating fruit.” The Englishman says, “Clearly, they’re English; observe how politely the woman is offering fruit to the man.” The Russian replies, “No, they are Russian communists, of course. They have no house, nothing to wear, little to eat, and they think they are in paradise.”

These are two of an endless array of jokes that had long circulated in the Soviet Union as a means of expressing in private what could not be said in public. A major theme of those jokes involved the hypocrisy of a communist system that promised equality and abundance for all but delivered a dismal and uncertain economic life for the many and great privileges for the few. The growing disbelief in the ability or willingness of the communist regime to provide a decent life for its people was certainly an important factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of communism in the land of its birth. Amid that disillusionment, it was hard to remember that earlier in the century communism had been greeted with enthusiasm by many people—in Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere—as a promise of liberation from inequality, oppression, exploitation, and backwardness.

COMMUNISM WAS A PHENOMENON OF ENORMOUS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE WORLD OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. Communist regimes came

**Lenin:** Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, was the Bolshevik leader of the Russian Revolution. He became the iconic symbol of world communism and in his own country was the focus of a semi-religious cult. This widely distributed Soviet propaganda poster reads “Lenin lived; Lenin lives; Lenin will live.” (Private Collection/Ria Novosti/The Bridgeman Art Library)

to power almost everywhere in the tumultuous wake of war, revolution, or both. Once established, those regimes set about a thorough and revolutionary transformation of their societies—“building socialism,” as they so often put it. Internationally, world communism posed a profound military and political/ideological threat to the Western world of capitalism and democracy, particularly during the decades of the cold war (1946–1991). That struggle divided continents, countries, and cities into communist and noncommunist halves. It also prompted a global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) for influence in the Global South. Most hauntingly, it spawned an arms race in horrendously destructive nuclear weapons that sent schoolchildren scrambling under their desks during air raid drills, while sober scientists speculated about the possible extinction of human life, and perhaps all life, in the event of a major war.

Then, to the amazement of everyone, it was over, more with a whimper than a bang. The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the collapse of communist regimes or the abandonment of communist principles practically everywhere. The great global struggle of capitalism and communism, embodied in the United States and the Soviet Union, was resolved in favor of the former far more quickly and much more peacefully than anyone had imagined possible.

### SEEKING THE MAIN POINT

What was the appeal of communism, both in terms of its promises and its achievements? To what extent did promise match achievements?

## Global Communism

### ■ Description

When and where did communism exercise influence during the twentieth century?

Modern communism found its political and philosophical roots in nineteenth-century European socialism, inspired by the teachings of Karl Marx. (See p. 852 and Document 17.4, pp. 867–70.) Although most European socialists came to believe that they could achieve their goals peacefully and through the democratic process, those who defined themselves as communists in the twentieth century disdained such reformism and advocated uncompromising revolution as the only possible route to a socialist future. Russia, later called the Soviet Union, was the first country to experience such a revolution. Other movements that later identified or allied with the Soviet Union likewise defined themselves as communist. In Marxist theory, communism also referred to a final stage of historical development when social equality and collective living would be most fully developed, largely without private property. Socialism was an intermediate stage along the way to that final goal.

By the 1970s, almost one-third of the world’s population lived in societies governed by communist regimes. By far the most significant were the Soviet Union, the world’s largest country in size, and China, the world’s largest country in population. But communism also came to Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II and the extension of the Soviet military presence there. In Asia, Mongolia came under a communist regime in 1924 as a spillover of the Russian Revolution. Following Japan’s defeat in World War II, its Korean colony was partitioned, with the northern half coming under Soviet and therefore communist control. In Vietnam, a much more

## A Map of Time

1917	Russian Revolution
1921	Founding of Chinese Communist Party
1929–1953	Stalin in power in Soviet Union
1934–1935	Long March in China
1945–1950	Imposition of communist regimes in Eastern Europe
1949	Communist triumph in China
1950–1953	Korean War
1958–1961	China's Great Leap Forward and massive famine
1959	Cuban revolution
1962	Cuban missile crisis
1965–1973	U.S.–Vietnam war
1966–1976	China's Cultural Revolution
1968	Prague Spring: communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia
1976–early 1990s	Deng Xiaoping and beginnings of communist reforms in China
1979	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
1985–1991	Gorbachev reforms in USSR
1989	Collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe
1991	Disintegration of Soviet Union

locally based communist movement, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, embodied both a socialist vision and Vietnamese nationalism as it battled Japanese, French, and later American invaders and established communist control first in the northern half of the country and after 1975 throughout the whole country. The victory of the Vietnamese communists spilled over into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, where communist parties took power in the mid-1970s. In Latin America, Fidel Castro led a revolutionary nationalist movement against a repressive, American-backed government in Cuba. On coming to power in 1959, Castro moved toward communism and an alliance with the Soviet Union. Finally, a shaky communist regime took power in Afghanistan in 1979, propped up briefly by massive Soviet military support. None of these countries had achieved the kind of advanced industrial capitalism that Karl Marx had viewed as a prerequisite for revolution and socialism. Indeed, in one of history's strange twists, the communist revolutions of the twentieth century took place in largely agrarian societies. (See Map 21.3, p. 1055, for a global view of the communist world in the 1970s, the period of its greatest extent.)

In addition to those countries where communist governments controlled state power, communist movements took root in still other places, where they exercised various degrees of influence. In the aftermath of World War II, communist parties played important political roles in Greece, France, and Italy. In the 1950s, a small communist party in the United States became the focus of an intense wave of fear and political repression known as McCarthyism. Revolutionary communist movements threatened established governments in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bolivia, Peru, and elsewhere, sometimes provoking brutal crackdowns by those governments. A number of African states in the 1970s proclaimed themselves Marxist for a time and aligned with the Soviet Union in international affairs. All of this was likewise part of global communism.

These differing expressions of communism were linked to one another in various ways. They shared a common ideology derived from European Marxism, although it was substantially modified in many places. That ideology minimized the claims of national loyalty and looked forward to an international revolutionary movement of the lower classes and a worldwide socialist federation. The Russian Revolution of 1917 served as an inspiration and an example to aspiring revolutionaries elsewhere, and the new Soviet Communist Party and government provided them aid and advice. Through an organization called Comintern (Communist International), Soviet authorities also sought to control their policies and actions.

During the cold war decades, the Warsaw Pact brought the Soviet Union and Eastern European communist states together in a military alliance designed to counter the threat from the Western capitalist countries of the NATO alliance. A parallel organization called the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance tied Eastern European economies tightly to the economy of the Soviet Union. A Treaty of Friendship between the Soviet Union and China in 1950 joined the two communist giants in an alliance that caused many in the West to view communism as a unified international movement aimed at their destruction. Nevertheless, rivalry, outright hostility, and on occasion military conflict marked the communist world as much or more than solidarity and cooperation. Eastern European resentment of their Soviet overlords boiled over in periodic rebellions, even as the Soviet Union and China came close to war in the late 1960s.

Although the globalization of communism found expression primarily in the second half of the twentieth century, that process began with two quite distinct and different revolutionary upheavals—one in Russia and the other in China—in the first half of the century.

## Revolutions as a Path to Communism

### ■ Comparison

Identify the major differences between the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

Communist movements of the twentieth century quite self-consciously drew on the mystique of the earlier French Revolution, which suggested that new and better worlds could be constructed by human actions. Like their French predecessors, communist revolutionaries ousted old ruling classes and dispossessed landed aristocracies. Those twentieth-century upheavals also involved vast peasant upheavals in the coun-

tryside and an educated leadership with roots in the cities. All three revolutions—French, Russian, and Chinese—found their vision of the good society in a modernizing future, not in some nostalgic vision of the past. Communists also worried lest their revolutions end up in a military dictatorship like that of Napoleon following the French Revolution.

But the communist revolutions were distinctive as well. They were made by highly organized parties guided by a Marxist ideology, were committed to an industrial future, pursued economic as well as political equality, and sought the abolition of private property. In doing so, they mobilized, celebrated, and claimed to act on behalf of society's lower classes—exploited urban workers and impoverished rural peasants. The middle classes, who were the chief beneficiaries of the French Revolution, numbered among the many victims of the communist upheavals. And unlike the French or American revolutions, communists also carried an explicit message of gender equality. The Russian and Chinese revolutions shared these general features, but in other respects they differed sharply from each other.

## Russia: Revolution in a Single Year

In Russia, communists came to power on the back of a revolutionary upheaval that took place within a single year, 1917. The immense pressures of World War I, which was going very badly for the Russians, represented the catalyst for that revolution as the accumulated tensions of Russian society exploded. Much exploited and suffering from wartime shortages, workers—men and women alike—took to the streets to express their outrage at the incompetence and privileges of the elites. In St. Petersburg, some 100,000 wives of soldiers demonstrated for bread and peace. Activists from various parties, many of them socialist, recruited members, organized demonstrations, published newspapers, and plotted revolution. By February 1917, Tsar Nicholas II had lost almost all support and was forced to abdicate the throne, thus ending the Romanov dynasty, which had ruled Russia for more than three centuries.

That historic event opened the door for a massive social upheaval. Ordinary soldiers, seeking an end to a terrible war and despising their upper-class officers, deserted in substantial numbers. In major industrial centers such as St. Petersburg and Moscow, new trade unions arose to defend workers' interests, and some workers seized control of their factories. Grassroots organizations of workers and soldiers, known as soviets, emerged to speak for ordinary people. Peasants, many of whom had been serfs only a generation or two earlier, seized landlords' estates, burned their manor houses, and redistributed the land among themselves. Non-Russian nationalists in Ukraine, Poland, Muslim Central Asia, and the Baltic region demanded greater autonomy or even independence (see Map 21.1, p. 1040).

This was social revolution, and it quickly demonstrated the inadequacy of the Provisional Government, which had come to power after the tsar abdicated. Consisting of middle-class politicians and some moderate socialist leaders, that government was divided and ineffectual, unable or unwilling to meet the demands of Russia's

■ **Change**  
Why were the Bolsheviks able to ride the Russian Revolution to power?



**Map 21.1** Russia in 1917

In 1917 during the First World War, the world's largest state, bridging both Europe and Asia, exploded in revolution. The Russian Revolution brought to power the twentieth century's first communist government and launched an international communist movement that eventually incorporated about one-third of the world's people.

revolutionary masses. Nor was it willing to take Russia out of the war, as many were now demanding. Impatience and outrage against the Provisional Government provided an opening for more radical groups. The most effective were the Bolsheviks (BOHL-shih-vehks), a small socialist party with a determined and charismatic leader, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, more commonly known as Lenin. He had long believed that Russia, despite its industrial backwardness, was nonetheless ready for a socialist revolution that would, he expected, spark further revolutions in the more developed countries of Europe. Thus backward Russia would be a catalyst for a more general socialist breakthrough. It was a striking revision of Marxist thinking to accommodate the conditions of a largely agrarian Russian society.

In the desperate circumstances of 1917, his party's message—an end to the war, land for the peasants, workers' control of factories, self-determination for non-Russian nationalities—resonated with an increasingly rebellious public mood, particularly in the major cities. On the basis of this program, the Bolsheviks—claiming to act on behalf of the highly popular soviets—seized power in late October during an overnight coup in the capital city of St. Petersburg.

Taking or claiming power was one thing; holding on to it was another. A three-year civil war followed in which the Bolsheviks, now officially calling their party "communist," battled an assortment of enemies—tsarist officials, landlords, disaffected

socialists, and regional nationalist forces, as well as troops from the United States, Britain, France, and Japan, all of which were eager to crush the fledgling communist regime. Remarkably, the Bolsheviks held on and by 1921 had staggered to victory over their divided and uncoordinated opponents. That remarkable victory was assisted by the Bolsheviks' willingness to sign a separate peace treaty with Germany, thus taking Russia out of World War I in early 1918, but at a great, though temporary, loss of Russian territory.

During the civil war (1918–1921), the Bolsheviks harshly regimented the economy, seized grain from angry peasants, suppressed nationalist rebellions, and perpetrated bloody atrocities, as did their enemies as well. But they also integrated many lower-class men into the Red Army, as Bolshevik military forces were

known, and into new local governments, providing them a fresh avenue of social mobility. By battling foreign troops, the Bolsheviks claimed to be defending Russia from imperialists and protecting the downtrodden masses from their exploiters. The civil war exaggerated even further the Bolsheviks' authoritarian tendencies and their inclination to use force. Shortly after that war ended, they renamed their country the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) and set about its transformation.

For the next twenty-five years, the Soviet Union remained a communist island in a capitalist sea. The next major extension of communist control occurred in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II, but it took place quite differently than in Russia. That war ended with Soviet military forces occupying much of Eastern Europe. Stalin, the USSR's longtime leader, determined that Soviet security required "friendly" governments in the region to permanently end the threat of invasion from the West. When the Marshall Plan seemed to suggest American efforts to incorporate Eastern Europe into a Western economic network, Stalin acted to install fully communist governments, loyal to himself, in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Backed by the pressure and presence of the Soviet army, communism was largely imposed on Eastern Europe from outside rather than growing out of a domestic revolution, as had happened in Russia itself.

Local communist parties, however, had some domestic support, deriving from their role in the resistance against the Nazis and their policies of land reform. In Hungary and Poland, for example, communist pressures led to the redistribution of much land



#### The Russian Civil War through Bolshevik Eyes

This Bolshevik poster from 1921, entitled "Electrification and Counter-Revolution," presents a communist view of the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution. It shows a worker bringing electricity and more generally the light of modernity and progress to a backward country, while depicting their opponents, which include a priest, a general, and a businessman, as seeking to extinguish that light. (The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY)

to poor or landless peasants, and in free elections in Czechoslovakia in 1946, communists received 38 percent of the vote. The situation in Yugoslavia differed sharply from the rest of Eastern Europe. There a genuinely popular communist movement had played a leading role in the struggle against Nazi occupation and came to power on its own with little Soviet help. Its leader, Josef Broz, known as Tito, openly defied Soviet efforts to control Yugoslav communism, claiming that “our goal is that everyone should be master in his own house.”<sup>1</sup>

## ***China: A Prolonged Revolutionary Struggle***

### ■ Change

**What was the appeal of communism in China before 1949?**

Communism triumphed in the ancient land of China in 1949, about thirty years after the Russian Revolution, likewise on the heels of war and domestic upheaval. But that revolution, which was a struggle of decades rather than a single year, was far different from its earlier Russian counterpart. The Chinese imperial system had collapsed in 1911, under the pressure of foreign imperialism, its own inadequacies, and mounting internal opposition (see pp. 932–41). Unlike Russia, where intellectuals had been discussing socialism for half a century or more before the revolution, the ideas of Karl Marx were barely known in China in the early twentieth century. Not until 1921 was a small Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founded, aimed initially at organizing the country’s minuscule urban working class.

Over the next twenty-eight years, that small party, with an initial membership of only sixty people, grew enormously, transformed its strategy, found a charismatic leader in Mao Zedong, engaged in an epic struggle with its opponents, fought the Japanese heroically, and in 1949 emerged victorious as the rulers of China. That victory was all the more surprising because the CCP faced a far more formidable foe than the weak Provisional Government over which the Bolsheviks had triumphed in Russia. That opponent was the Guomindang (GWOH-mihn-dahng) (Nationalist Party), which governed China after 1928. Led by a military officer, Chiang Kai-shek, that party promoted a measure of modern development (railroads, light industry, banking, airline services) in the decade that followed. However, the impact of these achievements was limited largely to the cities, leaving the rural areas, where most people lived, still impoverished. The Guomindang’s base of support was also narrow, deriving from urban elites, rural landlords, and Western powers.

Chased out of China’s cities in a wave of Guomindang-inspired anticomunist terror in 1927, the CCP groped its way toward a new revolutionary strategy, quite at odds with both classical Marxism and Russian practice. Whereas the Bolsheviks had found their primary audience among workers in Russia’s major cities, Chinese communists increasingly looked to the country’s peasant villages for support. Thus European Marxism was adapted once again, this time to fit the situation of a mostly peasant China. Still, it was no easy sell. Chinese peasants did not rise up spontaneously against their landlords, as Russian peasants had. However, years of guerrilla warfare, experiments with land reform in areas under communist control, and the

creation of a communist military force to protect liberated areas slowly gained for the CCP a growing measure of respect and support among China's peasants. In the process, Mao Zedong, the son of a prosperous Chinese peasant family and a professional revolutionary since the early 1920s, emerged as the party's leader.

To recruit women for the revolution, communists drew on a theoretical commitment to their liberation and in the areas under their control established a Marriage Law that outlawed arranged or "purchased" marriages, made divorce easier, and gave women the right to vote and own property. Early experiments with land reform offered equal shares to men and women alike. Women's associations enrolled hundreds of thousands of women and promoted literacy, fostered discussions of women's issues, and encouraged handicraft production such as making clothing, blankets, and shoes, so essential for the revolutionary forces. But resistance to such radical measures from more traditional rural villagers, especially the male peasants and soldiers on whom the communists depended, persuaded them to modify these measures. Women were not permitted to seek divorce from men on active military duty. Women's land deeds were often given to male family heads and were regarded as family property. Female party members found themselves limited to work with women or children.

It was Japan's brutal invasion of China that gave the CCP a decisive opening, for that attack destroyed Guomindang control over much of the country and forced it to retreat to the interior, where it became even more dependent on conservative landlords. The CCP, by contrast, grew from just 40,000 members in 1937 to more than 1.2 million in 1945, while the communist-led People's Liberation Army mushroomed to 900,000 men, supported by an additional 2 million militia troops (see Map 21.2). Much of this growing support derived from the vigor with which the CCP waged war against the Japanese invaders. Using guerrilla warfare techniques learned in the struggle against the Guomindang, communist forces established themselves behind enemy lines and, despite periodic setbacks, offered a measure of security to many Chinese faced with Japanese atrocities. The Guomindang, by contrast, sometimes seemed to be more interested in eliminating the communists than in actively fighting the Japanese. Furthermore, in the areas it controlled, the CCP reduced rents, taxes, and interest payments for peasants; taught literacy to adults; and mobilized women for the



**Mao Zedong and the Long March**

An early member of China's then minuscule Communist Party, Mao rose to a position of dominant leadership during the Long March of 1934–1935, when beleaguered communists from southeastern China trekked to a new base area in the north. This photograph shows Mao on his horse during that epic journey of some 6,000 miles. (Collection J.A. Fox/Magnum Photos)

**Map 21.2** The Rise of Communism in China

Communism arose in China at the same time as the country was engaged in a terrible war with Japan and in the context of a civil war with Guomindang forces.



struggle. As the war drew to a close, more radical action followed. Teams of activists encouraged poor peasants to “speak bitterness” in public meetings, to “struggle” with landlords, and to “settle accounts” with them.

Thus the CCP frontally addressed both of China’s major problems—foreign imperialism and peasant exploitation. It expressed Chinese nationalism as well as a demand for radical social change. It gained a reputation for honesty that contrasted sharply with the massive corruption of Guomindang officials. It put down deep roots among the peasantry in a way that the Bolsheviks never did. And whereas the Bolsheviks gained support by urging Russian withdrawal from the highly unpopular First

World War, the CCP won support by aggressively pursuing the struggle against Japanese invaders during World War II. In 1949, four years after the war's end, the Chinese communists swept to victory over the Guomindang, many of whose followers fled to Taiwan. Mao Zedong announced triumphantly in Beijing's Tiananmen Square that "the Chinese people have stood up."

## Building Socialism

Once they came to power, communist parties everywhere set about the construction of socialist societies. In the Soviet Union, this massive undertaking occurred under the leadership of Joseph Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s. The corresponding Chinese effort took place during the 1950s and 1960s with Mao Zedong at the helm.

To communist regimes, building socialism meant first of all the modernization and industrialization of their backward societies. They sought, however, a distinctly socialist modernity. This involved a frontal attack on long-standing inequalities of class and gender, an effort to prevent the making of new inequalities as the process of modern development unfolded, and the promotion of cultural values of selflessness and collectivism that could support a socialist society.

Those imperatives generated a political system thoroughly dominated by the Communist Party. Top-ranking party members enjoyed various privileges but were expected to be exemplars of socialism in the making by being disciplined, selfless, and utterly loyal to their country's Marxist ideology. The party itself penetrated society in ways that Western scholars called "totalitarian," for other parties were forbidden, the state controlled almost the entire economy, and political authorities ensured that the arts, education, and the media conformed to approved ways of thinking. Mass organizations for women, workers, students, and various professional groups operated under party control, with none of the independence that characterized civil society in the West.

In undertaking these tasks, the Soviet Union and China started from different places, most notably their international positions. In 1917 Russian Bolsheviks faced a hostile capitalist world alone, while Chinese communists, coming to power over thirty years later, had an established Soviet Union as a friendly northern neighbor and ally. Furthermore, Chinese revolutionaries had actually governed parts of their huge country for decades, gaining experience that the new Soviet rulers had altogether lacked, since they had come to power so quickly. And the Chinese communists were firmly rooted in the rural areas and among the country's vast peasant population, while their Russian counterparts had found their support mainly in the cities.

If these comparisons generally favored China in its efforts to "build socialism," in economic terms that country faced even more daunting prospects than did the Soviet Union. Its population was far greater, its industrial base far smaller, and the availability of new agricultural land far more limited than in the Soviet Union. China's literacy and modern education as well as its transportation network were likewise

much less developed. Even more than the Soviets, Chinese communists had to build a modern society from the ground up.

## Communist Feminism

### ■ Change

What changes did communist regimes bring to the lives of women?

Among the earliest and most revolutionary actions of these new communist regimes were efforts at liberating and mobilizing women. Communist countries in fact pioneered forms of women's liberation that only later were adopted in the West. This communist feminism was largely state-directed, with the initiative coming from the top rather than bubbling up from grassroots movements as in the West. In the Soviet Union, where a small women's movement had taken shape in pre–World War I Russia, the new communist government almost immediately issued a series of laws and decrees regarding women. These measures declared full legal and political equality for

women; marriage became a civil procedure among freely consenting adults; divorce was legalized and made easier, as was abortion; illegitimacy was abolished; women no longer had to take their husbands' surnames; pregnancy leave for employed women was mandated; and women were actively mobilized as workers in the country's drive to industrialization. Addressing a Congress of Women Workers and Peasants, Lenin declared: "Root out old habits. Every cook must learn to rule the state."<sup>2</sup>

In 1919, the party set up a special organization called Zhenotdel (zhen-ut-DEL) (Women's Department), whose radical leaders, all women, pushed a decidedly feminist agenda during the 1920s. They organized numerous conferences for women, trained women to run day-care centers and medical clinics, published newspapers and magazines aimed at a female audience, provided literacy and prenatal classes, and encouraged Muslim women to take off their veils. Alexandra Rodionova, a former streetcar conductor who had played an active role in the revolution, recalled the impact of participation in Zhenotdel: "This former illiterate working girl had been transformed into a person, powerful with the knowledge of her own rights, a consciousness of responsibility for everything happening in the country."<sup>3</sup> Much of this encountered opposition from male communist officials and from ordinary people as well, and Stalin abolished Zhenotdel in 1930. While it lasted, though, it was a remarkable experiment in



**Mobilizing Women for Communism**

As the Soviet Union mobilized for rapid economic development in the 1930s, women entered the workforce in great numbers. Here two young women are mastering the skills of driving a tractor on one of the large collective farms that replaced the country's private agriculture. (Sovfoto/Eastfoto)

women's liberation by means of state action, animated by an almost utopian sense of new possibilities set loose by the revolution.

Similar policies took shape in communist China. The Marriage Law of 1950 was a direct attack on patriarchal and Confucian traditions. It decreed free choice in marriage, relatively easy divorce, the end of concubinage and child marriage, permission for widows to remarry, and equal property rights for women. A short but intense campaign by the CCP in the early 1950s sought to implement these changes, often against strenuous opposition. The party also launched a Women's Federation, a mass organization that enrolled millions of women. Its leadership, however, was far less radical than that of the Bolshevik feminists who led Zhenotdel in the 1920s. In China, there was little talk of "free love" or the "withering away of the family," as there had been in the USSR. Nevertheless, like their Soviet counterparts, Chinese women became much more actively involved in production outside the home. By 1978, 50 percent of agricultural workers and 38 percent of nonagricultural laborers were female. "Women can do anything" became a famous party slogan in the 1960s (see Visual Source 21.3, p. 1083).

Still, communist-style women's liberation had definite limits. Fearing that the "woman question" would detract from his emphasis on industrial production, Stalin declared it "solved" in 1930. Little direct discussion of women's issues was permitted in the several decades that followed. In neither the Soviet Union nor China did the Communist Party undertake a direct attack on male domination within the family. Thus the double burden of housework and child care plus paid employment continued to afflict most women. Moreover, women appeared only very rarely in the top political leadership of either country.

## *Socialism in the Countryside*

In their efforts to build socialism, both the Soviet Union and China first expropriated landlords' estates and redistributed that land on a much more equitable basis to the peasantry. Such actions, although clearly revolutionary, were not socialist, for peasants initially received their land as private property. In Russia, the peasants had spontaneously redistributed the land among themselves, and the victorious Bolsheviks merely ratified their actions. In China after 1949, land reform was a more prolonged and difficult process. Hastily trained teams were dispatched to the newly liberated areas, where they mobilized the poorer peasants in thousands of separate villages to confront and humiliate the landlords or the more wealthy peasants. Their land, animals, tools, houses, and money were then redistributed to the poorer members of the village. In these villages, land reform teams encountered the age-old deference that peasants traditionally had rendered to their social superiors. One young woman activist described the confrontational meetings intended to break this ancient pattern:

"Speak bitterness meetings," as they were called, would help [the peasants] to understand how things really had been in the old days, to realize that their lives

### ■ Comparison

How did the collectivization of agriculture differ between the USSR and China?

were not blindly ordained by fate . . . and that far from owing anything to the feudal landlords, it was the feudal landlords who owed them a debt of suffering beyond all reckoning.<sup>4</sup>

It was, as Mao Zedong put it, “not a dinner party.” Approximately 1 to 2 million landlords were killed in the process, which was largely over by 1952.

A second and more distinctly socialist stage of rural reform sought to end private property in land by collectivizing agriculture. In China, despite brief resistance from richer peasants, collectivization during the 1950s was a generally peaceful process, owing much to the close relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the peasantry, which had been established during three decades of struggle. This contrasted markedly with the earlier experience of the Soviet Union from 1928 to 1933, when peasants were forced into collective farms and violence was extensive. Russian peasants slaughtered and consumed hundreds of thousands of animals rather than surrender them to the collectives. Stalin singled out the richer peasants, known as *kulaks* (koo-LAHKS), for exclusion from the new collective farms. Some were killed, and many others were deported to remote areas of the country. With little support or experience in the countryside, Soviet communists, who came mostly from the cities, were viewed as intrusive outsiders in Russian peasant villages. A terrible famine ensued, with some 5 million deaths from starvation or malnutrition. (See Document 21.2, pp. 1071–73, for a firsthand account of the collectivization process.)

China, however, pushed collectivization even further than the Soviet Union did, particularly in huge “people’s communes” during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. It was an effort to mobilize China’s enormous population for rapid development and at the same time to move toward a more fully communist society with an even greater degree of social equality and collective living. (See Visual Source 21.2, p. 1082, for more on communes.) Administrative chaos, disruption of marketing networks, and bad weather combined to produce a massive famine that killed an amazing 20 million people or more between 1959 and 1962, dwarfing even the earlier Soviet famine.

## Communism and Industrial Development

### ■ Change

What were the achievements of communist efforts at industrialization?  
What problems did these achievements generate?

Both the Soviet Union and China defined industrialization as a fundamental task of their regimes. That process was necessary to end humiliating backwardness and poverty, to provide the economic basis for socialism, and to create the military strength that would enable their revolutions to survive in a hostile world. Though strongly anticapitalist, communists everywhere were ardent modernizers.

When the Chinese communists began their active industrialization efforts in the early 1950s, they largely followed the model pioneered by the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and the 1930s. That model involved state ownership of property, centralized planning embodied in successive five-year plans, priority to heavy industry, massive mobilization of the nation’s human and material resources, and intrusive Communist

Party control of the entire process. (See Document 21.1, pp. 1069–71, and Document 21.3, pp. 1073–75, for more on Soviet industrialization.) Both countries experienced major—indeed unprecedented—economic growth. The Soviet Union constructed the foundations of an industrial society in the 1930s that proved itself in the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II and that by the 1960s and 1970s generated substantially improved standards of living. China also quickly expanded its output (see the Snapshot). In addition, both countries achieved massive improvements

### Snapshot China under Mao, 1949–1976

The following table reveals some of the achievements, limitations, and tragedies of China's communist experience during the era of Mao Zedong.<sup>5</sup>

Steel production	from 1.3 million to 23 million tons
Coal production	from 66 million to 448 million tons
Electric power generation	from 7 million to 133 billion kilowatt-hours
Fertilizer production	from 0.2 million to 28 million tons
Cement production	from 3 million to 49 million tons
Industrial workers	from 3 million to 50 million
Scientists and technicians	from 50,000 to 5 million
"Barefoot doctors" posted to countryside	1 million
Annual growth rate of industrial output	11 percent
Annual growth rate of agricultural output	2.3 percent
Total population	from 542 million to 1 billion
Average population growth rate per year	2 percent
Per capita consumption of rural dwellers	from 62 to 124 yuan annually
Per capita consumption of urban dwellers	from 148 to 324 yuan
Overall life expectancy	from 35 to 65 years
Counterrevolutionaries killed (1949–1952)	between 1 million and 3 million
People labeled "rightists" in 1957	550,000
Deaths from famine during Great Leap Forward	20 million or more
Deaths during Cultural Revolution	500,000
Officials sent down to rural labor camps during Cultural Revolution	3 million or more
Urban youth sent down to countryside (1967–1976)	17 million

in their literacy rates and educational opportunities, allowing far greater social mobility for millions of people than ever before. In both countries, industrialization fostered a similar set of social outcomes: rapid urbanization, exploitation of the countryside to provide resources for modern industry in the cities, and the growth of a privileged bureaucratic and technological elite intent on pursuing their own careers and passing on their new status to their children.

### The Great Leap Forward

This Chinese poster from 1960 celebrates both the agricultural and industrial efforts of the Great Leap Forward. The caption reads: "Start the movement to increase production and practice thrift, with food-stuffs and steel at the center, with great force!" The great famine that accompanied this "great leap" belied the optimistic outlook of the poster. (IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger collections <http://chineseplaques.net>)

Perhaps the chief difference in the industrial histories of the Soviet Union and China lies in the leadership's response to these social outcomes. In the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors, they were largely accepted. Industrialization was centered in large urban areas, which pulled from the countryside the most ambitious and talented people. A highly privileged group of state and party leaders emerged in the Stalin era and largely remained the unchallenged ruling class of the country until the 1980s. Even in the 1930s, the outlines of a conservative society, which had discarded much of its revolutionary legacy, were apparent. Stalin himself endorsed Russian patriotism, traditional family values, individual competition, and substantial differences in wages to stimulate production, as an earlier commitment to egalitarianism was substantially abandoned. Increasingly the invocation of revolutionary values was devoid of real content, and by the 1970s the perception of official hypocrisy was widespread.

The unique feature of Chinese history under Mao Zedong's leadership was a recurrent effort to combat these perhaps inevitable tendencies of any industrializing process and to revive and preserve the revolutionary spirit, which had animated the Communist Party during its long struggle for power. By the mid-1950s, Mao and some of his followers had become persuaded that the Soviet model of industrialization was leading China away from socialism and toward new forms of inequality, toward individualistic and careerist values, and toward an urban bias that privileged the cities at the expense of the countryside. The Great Leap Forward of 1958–1960 marked Mao's first response to these distortions of Chinese socialism. It promoted small-scale industrialization in the rural areas rather than focusing wholly on large enterprises in the cities; it tried to foster widespread and practical technological education for all rather than relying on a small elite of highly trained technical experts; and it envisaged an immediate transition to full communism in the "people's communes" rather than waiting for industrial development to provide the material basis for that transition. The massive famine that followed temporarily discredited Mao's radicalism.



Nonetheless in the mid-1960s, Mao launched yet another campaign—the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—to combat the capitalist tendencies that he believed had penetrated even the highest ranks of the Communist Party itself. The Cultural Revolution also involved new policies to bring health care and education to the countryside and to reinvigorate earlier efforts at rural industrialization under local rather than central control. In these ways, Mao struggled, though without great success, to overcome the inequalities associated with China's modern development and to create a model of socialist modernity quite distinct from that of the Soviet Union.

The Cultural Revolution also rejected feminism, any specific concern with women's issues, and much that was feminine. A popular slogan stated: "The times have changed; men and women are the same." Yet the supposedly gender-neutral model seemed strikingly masculine. Women cut their hair short, wore army clothes, and learned to curse; they were depicted in propaganda posters as "iron girls," strong, muscular, and performing heavy traditionally male work (see Visual Source 21.3, p. 1083). Art, literature, ballet, and opera cast them as militant revolutionary participants. And yet, factory managers continued to prefer women workers because of their alleged patience and manual dexterity. Young women sent to the countryside to work with peasants found themselves subject to sexual abuse by male officials.<sup>6</sup> Thus strenuous Maoist efforts to eliminate differences between classes, between urban and rural life, and between men and women largely failed.

A final commonality among communist industrializers lay in their great confidence in human rationality and centralized planning embodied in huge projects—enormous factories, large collective farms, gigantic dams. Soviet officials saw the environment as an enemy, spoke about "the struggle against nature," and looked forward to "a profound rearrangement of the entire living world."<sup>7</sup> This attitude, no less than capitalist assumptions, led to immense environmental devastation and a very difficult legacy for postcommunist regimes. In the Soviet Union, for example, huge industrial complexes such as Magnitogorsk concentrated air and water pollution. A scheme to bring millions of acres of semi-arid land under cultivation in Central Asia depleted and eroded the fragile soil. Diverting the waters of several rivers feeding the Aral Sea for irrigating cotton fields reduced the size of that huge inland sea by 90 percent. By the late 1980s, such environmental heedlessness meant that about half of the cultivated land in the country was endangered by erosion, salinization, or swamping; some 30 percent of food products were contaminated by pesticides or herbicides; 75 percent of the surface water was severely polluted; and 70 million people lived in cities with air pollution five times or more the acceptable level.<sup>8</sup>

## *The Search for Enemies*

Despite their totalitarian tendencies, the communist societies of the Soviet Union and China were laced with conflict. Under both Stalin and Mao, those conflicts erupted in a search for enemies that disfigured both societies. An elastic concept of "enemy" came to include not only surviving remnants from the prerevolutionary elites but also, and more surprisingly, high-ranking members and longtime supporters of the

**■ Explanation**  
Why did communist regimes generate terror and violence on such a massive scale?

## PORTRAIT

### Anna Dubova, A Russian Peasant Girl and Urban Woman

Born into a large peasant family near Smolensk in western Russia in 1916, Anna Dubova lived through the entire communist experience of her country.<sup>9</sup> Hers was a life that illustrates the complexities that ordinary individuals faced as they sought to navigate the communist system.

Anna was one of fourteen children, of whom seven survived. Her family was dominated by a strict, hard-working, and highly religious father, who was choirmaster of the local church. Anna's father was suspicious of the communists when they came to power the year after Anna's birth, but her grandmother was more forthright. "We have a new tsar," she declared. "The forces of the Anti-christ have triumphed." Nonetheless, her father accepted an appointment in 1922 as chairman of the village soviet, the new communist organ of local government. During the 1920s, the village and Anna's family flourished under Lenin's New Economic Policy, which briefly permitted a considerable measure of private enterprise and profit making. Her father even opened a



A 1941 image of a woman factory worker  
in Moscow. (Library of Congress,  
LC-USW33-024241-C)

small shop in the village where he sold goods purchased in the city.

By 1928, however, everything changed as the Soviet regime, now under Joseph Stalin's leadership, abruptly moved to collectivize agriculture and root out *kulaks*, supposedly wealthy peasants who were thought to bear the germ of a hated capitalism. Because of her father's shop, the family was labeled as *kulak*, their property confiscated. "I remember so well how Mama sat and cried when they took away the cow," Anna recalled years later. The family foisted their expected deportation to the far north of the Soviet Union only by promising Anna, then just thirteen, in marriage to the local Communist Party secretary. The marriage never took place, however, and the family was forced to leave.

Later, Anna was permitted to join her older sister in Moscow, but approval for that much-coveted move came at a very high price. "I had to write out an official statement that I renounced my parents, that I no longer had any ties with them."

Communist Party who allegedly had been corrupted by bourgeois ideas. Refracted through the lens of Marxist thinking, these people became class enemies who had betrayed the revolution and were engaged in a vast conspiracy, often linked to foreign imperialists, to subvert the socialist enterprise and restore capitalism. In the rhetoric of the leadership, the class struggle continued and even intensified as the triumph of socialism drew closer.

In the Soviet Union, that process culminated in the Terror, or the Great Purges, of the late 1930s, which enveloped tens of thousands of prominent communists, including virtually all of Lenin's top associates, and millions of more ordinary people. (See Document 21.4, pp. 1075–78, and the Portrait of Anna Dubova, above, for individual experiences of the Terror.) Based on suspicious associations in the past, denunciations by colleagues, connections to foreign countries, or simply bad luck,

Thus Anna, a rural teenager, joined millions of other peasants who flocked to the city to pursue new opportunities that became available as the Soviet Union launched its industrialization drive. In Moscow, she gained a basic education, a vocation in cake decorating, which she enjoyed, and a brief stint as a mechanic and chauffeur, which she detested. All the while the shadow of her *kulak* label followed her. Had it been discovered, she could have lost her job and her permission to live in Moscow. And so she married a party activist from a poor peasant family, “just so I could cover up my background.” Her husband drank heavily, leaving her with a daughter when he went off to war in 1941.

In the Soviet Union, the late 1930s witnessed the Terror when millions of alleged “enemies of the people” were arrested and hauled off to execution or labor camps. Anna recalled what it was like: “You’d come home and they’d say, Yesterday they took away Uncle Lesha.... You’d go to see a girlfriend, they’d say, We have an empty room now; they’ve exiled Andreitsev.” Like most people not directly involved, Anna believed in the guilt of these people. And she feared that she herself might be mistakenly accused, for those with a *kulak* label were particular targets of the search for enemies. “I was only afraid,” she remembered, “that I would be raped in prison.”

Beyond her *kulak* background, Anna also felt compelled to hide a deep religious sensibility derived from her child-

hood. She remembered the disappearance of the village priest, the looting of the churches, and the destruction of icons. And so she never entered a church or prayed in front of others. But she wore a cross under her clothing. “I never stopped [believing],” she recalled. “But I concealed it. Deep down . . . I believed.” Nor did she ever seek to join the Communist Party, though it may well have advanced her career prospects and standard of living. Perhaps she feared that the investigations accompanying party membership would have disclosed her compromising social and religious background.

In the decades following World War II and especially after Stalin’s death in 1953, Anna’s life seemed to stabilize. She entered into a thirty-year relationship with a man and found satisfying work in a construction design office, though the lack of higher education and party connections prevented her from moving into higher-paid jobs. Looking back on her life, she regretted the communist intrusion, particularly in its Stalinist phase, into what she remembered as a happy childhood. She had come to value, perhaps nostalgically, the life of a peasant, where “I would have lived on the fruits of my labor,” over that of an urban worker, where, she felt, “I’ve lived someone else’s life.”

**Question:** In what ways did communism shape Anna’s life, and in what respects was she able to construct her own life within that system?

such people were arrested, usually in the dead of night, and then tried and sentenced either to death or to long years in harsh and remote labor camps known as the gulag. A series of show trials publicized the menace that these “enemies of the people” allegedly posed to the country and its revolution. Close to 1 million people were executed between 1936 and 1941. Perhaps an additional 4 or 5 million were sent to the gulag, where they were forced to work in horrendous conditions and died in appalling numbers. Victimizers too were numerous: the Terror consumed the energies of a huge corps of officials, investigators, interrogators, informers, guards, and executioners, many of whom themselves were arrested, exiled, or executed in the course of the purges.

In the Soviet Union, the search for enemies occurred under the clear control of the state. In China, however, it became a much more public process, escaping the control

of the leadership, particularly during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1969. Mao had become convinced that many within the Communist Party had been seduced by capitalist values of self-seeking and materialism and were no longer animated by the idealistic revolutionary vision of earlier times. Therefore, he called for rebellion, against the Communist Party itself. Millions of young people responded, and, organized as Red Guards, they set out to rid China of those who were “taking the capitalist road.” Following gigantic and ecstatic rallies in Beijing, they fanned out across the country

and attacked local party and government officials, teachers, intellectuals, factory managers, and others they defined as enemies. (See Visual Sources 21.1 and 21.4, pp. 1080 and 1084.) Rival revolutionary groups soon began fighting with one another, violence erupted throughout the country, and civil war threatened China. Mao was forced to call in the military to restore order and Communist Party control. Both the Soviet Terror and the Chinese Cultural Revolution badly discredited the very idea of socialism and contributed to the ultimate collapse of the communist experiment at the end of the century.

### SUMMING UP SO FAR

How did the Soviet Union and China differ in terms of the revolutions that brought communists to power and in the construction of socialist societies? What commonalities are also apparent?

## East versus West: A Global Divide and a Cold War

Not only did communist regimes bring revolutionary changes to the societies they governed, but their very existence launched a global conflict that restructured international life and touched the lives of almost everyone, particularly in the twentieth century’s second half. That rift began soon after the Russian Revolution when the new communist government became the source of fear and loathing to many in the Western capitalist world. The common threat of Nazi Germany temporarily made unlikely allies of the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States, but a few years after World War II ended, that division erupted again in what became known as the cold war. Underlying that conflict were the geopolitical and ideological realities of the postwar world. The Soviet Union and the United States were now the major political/military powers, replacing the shattered and diminished states of Western Europe, but they represented sharply opposed views of history, society, politics, and international relations. Conflict, in retrospect, seemed almost inevitable.

### Military Conflict and the Cold War

#### ■ Connection

In what different ways was the cold war expressed?

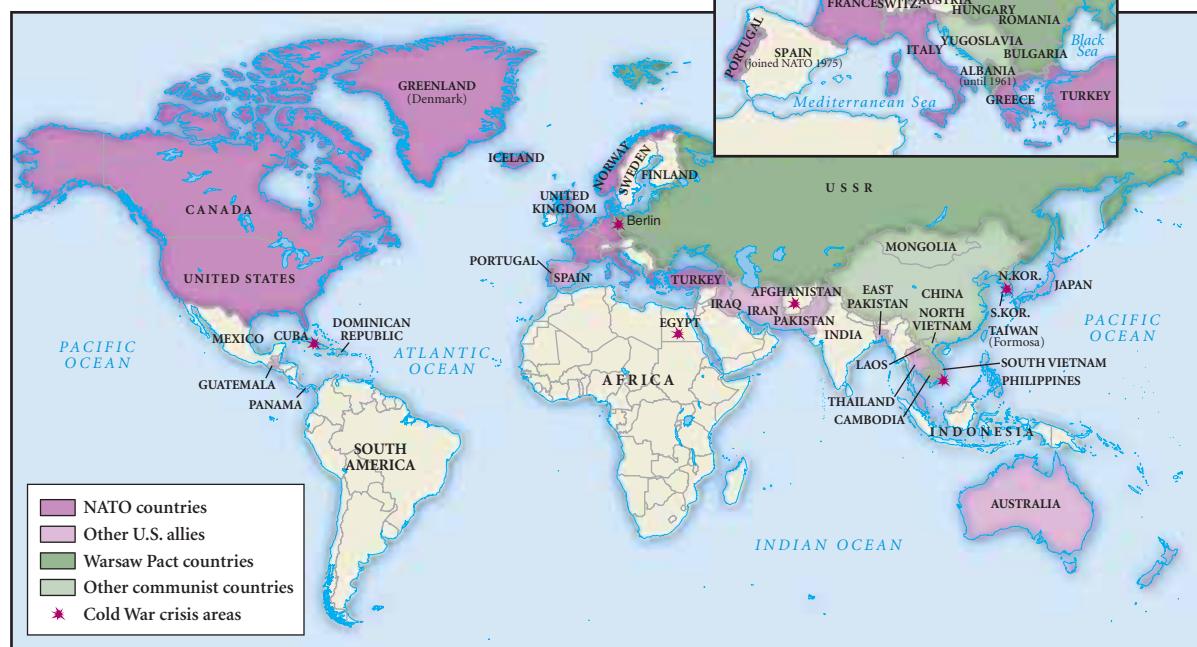
The initial arena of the cold war was Europe, where Soviet insistence on security and control in Eastern Europe clashed with American and British desires for open and democratic societies with ties to the capitalist world economy. What resulted were rival military alliances (NATO and the Warsaw Pact), a largely voluntary American sphere of influence in Western Europe, and an imposed Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe. The heavily fortified border between Eastern and Western Europe came to be known as the Iron Curtain. Thus Europe was bitterly divided. But although tensions

flared across this dividing line, particularly in Berlin, no shooting war occurred between the two sides (see Map 21.3).

By contrast, the extension of communism into Asia—China, Korea, and Vietnam—globalized the cold war and occasioned its most destructive and prolonged “hot wars.” A North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950 led to both Chinese and American involvement in a bitter three-year war (1950–1953), which ended in an essential standoff that left the Korean peninsula still divided in the early twenty-first century. Likewise in Vietnam, military efforts by South Vietnamese communists and the already communist North Vietnamese government to unify their country prompted massive American intervention in the 1960s. To American authorities, a communist victory opened the door to further communist expansion in Asia and beyond. Armed and supported by the Soviets and Chinese and willing to endure enormous losses, the Vietnamese communists bested the Americans, who were hobbled by growing protest at home. The Vietnamese united their country under communist control by 1975.

### Map 21.3 The Global Cold War

The cold war witnessed a sharp division between the communist world and the Western democratic world. It also divided the continent of Europe; the countries of China, Korea, Vietnam, and Germany; and the city of Berlin. In many places, it also sparked crises that brought the nuclear-armed superpowers of the United States and the USSR to the brink of war, although in every case they managed to avoid direct military conflict between themselves.



A third major military conflict of the cold war era occurred in Afghanistan, where a Marxist party had taken power in 1978. Soviet leaders were delighted at this extension of communism on their southern border, but radical land reforms and efforts to liberate Afghan women soon alienated much of this conservative Muslim country and led to a mounting opposition movement. Fearing the overthrow of a new communist state and its replacement by Islamic radicals, Soviet forces intervened militarily and were soon bogged down in a war they could not win. For a full decade (1979–1989), that war was a “bleeding wound,” sustained in part by U.S. aid to Afghan guerrillas. Under widespread international pressure, Soviet forces finally withdrew in 1989, and the Afghan communist regime soon collapsed. In Vietnam and Afghanistan, both superpowers painfully experienced the limits of their power.

The most haunting battle of the cold war era was one that never happened. The setting was Cuba. When the revolutionary Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, his nationalization of American assets provoked great U.S. hostility and efforts to overthrow his regime. Such pressure only pushed this revolutionary nationalist closer to the Soviet Union, and gradually he began to think of himself and his revolution as Marxist. Soviet authorities were elated. “You Americans must realize what Cuba means to us old Bolsheviks,” declared one high-ranking Soviet official. “We have been waiting all our lives for a country to go communist without the Red Army. It has happened in Cuba, and it makes us feel like boys again.”<sup>10</sup> Fearing the loss of their newfound Caribbean ally to American aggression, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (KROOSH-chef), who had risen to power after Stalin’s death in 1953, secretly deployed nuclear-tipped Soviet missiles to Cuba, believing that this would deter further U.S. action against Castro. When the missiles were discovered in October 1962, the world held its breath for thirteen days as American forces blockaded the island and prepared for an invasion. A nuclear exchange between the superpowers seemed imminent, but that catastrophe was averted by a compromise between Khrushchev and U.S. president John F. Kennedy. Under its terms, the Soviets removed their missiles from Cuba in return for an American promise not to invade the island.

### **Nuclear Standoff and Third World Rivalry**

The Cuban missile crisis gave concrete expression to the most novel and dangerous dimension of the cold war—the arms race in nuclear weapons. An American monopoly on those weapons when World War II ended prompted the Soviet Union to redouble its efforts to acquire them, and in 1949 it succeeded. Over the next forty years, the world moved from a mere handful of nuclear weapons to a global arsenal of close to 60,000 warheads. Delivery systems included bomber aircraft and missiles that could rapidly propel numerous warheads across whole continents and oceans with accuracies measured in hundreds of feet. During those decades, the world’s many peoples lived in the shadow of weapons whose destructive power is scarcely within the bounds of human imagination. A single bomb in a single instant could have

obliterated any major city in the world. The detonation of even a small fraction of the weapons then in the arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States could have reduced the target countries to radioactive rubble and social chaos. Responsible scientists seriously discussed the possible extinction of the human species under such conditions.

Awareness of this possibility is surely the primary reason that no shooting war of any kind occurred between the two superpowers. In the two world wars, the participants had been greatly surprised by the destructiveness of modern weapons. During the cold war, however, the leaders of the two superpowers knew beyond any doubt that a nuclear war would produce only losers and utter catastrophe.

Already in 1949, Stalin had observed that

“atomic weapons can hardly be used without spelling the end of the world.”<sup>11</sup> Particularly after the frightening Cuban missile crisis of 1962, both sides carefully avoided further nuclear provocation, even while continuing the buildup of their respective arsenals. Moreover, because they feared that a conventional war would escalate to the nuclear level, they implicitly agreed to sidestep any direct military confrontation at all.

Still, opportunities for conflict abounded as the U.S.–Soviet rivalry spanned the globe. Using military and economic aid, educational opportunities, political pressure, and covert action, both sides courted countries emerging from colonial rule. Cold war fears of communist penetration prompted U.S. intervention, sometimes openly and often secretly, in Iran, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, the Congo, and elsewhere. In the process the United States frequently supported anticomunist but corrupt and authoritarian regimes. However, neither superpower was able to completely dominate its supposed allies, many of whom resisted the role of pawns in superpower rivalries. Some countries, such as India, took a posture of nonalignment in the cold war, while others tried to play off the superpowers against each other. Indonesia received large amounts of Soviet and Eastern European aid, but that did not prevent it from destroying the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, killing half a million suspected communists in the process. When the Americans refused to assist Egypt in building the Aswan Dam in the mid-1950s, that country developed a close relationship with the Soviet Union. Later, in 1972, Egypt expelled 21,000 Soviet advisers and again aligned more clearly with the United States.



**The Hydrogen Bomb**

During the 1950s and early 1960s, tests in the atmosphere of ever larger and more sophisticated hydrogen bombs made images of enormous fireballs and mushroom-shaped clouds the universal symbol of these weapons, which were immensely more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. The American test pictured here took place in 1957. (Image courtesy The Nuclear Weapon Archive)

## *The Cold War and the Superpowers*

### ■ Connection

In what ways did the United States play a global role after World War II?

World War II and the cold war provided the context for the emergence of the United States as a global superpower, playing a role that has often been compared to that of Great Britain in the nineteenth century. Much of that effort was driven by the perceived demands of the cold war, during which the United States spearheaded the Western effort to contain a worldwide communist movement that seemed to be advancing. By 1970, one writer observed, “the United States had more than 1,000,000 soldiers in 30 countries, was a member of four regional defense alliances and an active participant in a fifth, had mutual defense treaties with 42 nations, was a member of 53 international organizations, and was furnishing military or economic aid to nearly 100 nations across the face of the globe.”<sup>12</sup>

The need for quick and often secret decision making gave rise in the United States to a strong or “imperial” presidency and a “national security state,” in which defense and intelligence agencies acquired great power within the government and were often unaccountable to Congress. This served to strengthen the influence of what U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961) called the “military-industrial complex,” a coalition of the armed services, military research laboratories, and private defense industries that both stimulated and benefited from increased military spending and cold war tensions.

Sustaining this immense military effort was a flourishing U.S. economy and an increasingly middle-class society. The United States was the only major industrial country to escape the physical devastation of war on its own soil. As World War II ended with Europe, the Soviet Union, and Japan in ruins, the United States was clearly the world’s most productive economy. “The whole world is hungry for American goods,” wrote one American economist in 1945.<sup>13</sup> Beyond their goods, Americans sent their capital abroad in growing amounts—from \$19 billion in 1950 to \$81 billion in 1965. Huge American firms such as General Motors, Ford, Mobil, Sears, General Electric, and Westinghouse established factories, offices, and subsidiaries in many countries and sold their goods locally. The U.S. dollar replaced the British pound as the most trusted international currency.

Accompanying the United States’ political and economic penetration of the world was its popular culture. In musical terms, first jazz, then rock-and-roll, and most recently rap have found receptive audiences abroad, particularly among the young. By the 1990s, American movies took about 70 percent of the market in Europe, and in 2012 some 33,000 McDonald’s restaurants in 119 countries served 68 million customers every day. Various American brand names—Kleenex, Coca-Cola, Jeep, Spam, Nike, Kodak—became common points of reference around the world. English became a global language, while American slang terms—“groovy,” “crazy,” “cool”—were integrated into many of the world’s languages.

On the communist side, the cold war was accompanied by considerable turmoil both within and among the various communist states. Joseph Stalin, Soviet dictator and acknowledged leader of the communist world in general, died in 1953 as that

global conflict was mounting. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, stunned his country and communists everywhere with a lengthy speech delivered to a party congress in 1956 in which he presented a devastating account of Stalin's crimes, particularly those against party members. These revelations shocked many of the party faithful, for Stalin had been viewed as the "genius of all time." Now he was presented as a criminal.

In the Soviet Union, the superpower of the communist world, the cold war justified a continuing emphasis on military and defense industries after World War II and gave rise to a Soviet version of the military-industrial complex. Soviet citizens, even more than Americans, were subject to incessant government propaganda that glorified their system and vilified that of their American opponents.

As the communist world expanded, so too did divisions and conflicts among its various countries. Many in the West had initially viewed world communism as a monolithic force whose disciplined members meekly followed Soviet dictates in cold war solidarity against the West. And Marxists everywhere contended that revolutionary socialism would erode national loyalties as the "workers of the world" united in common opposition to global capitalism. Nonetheless, the communist world experienced far more bitter and divisive conflict than did the Western alliance, which was composed of supposedly warlike, greedy, and highly competitive nations.

In Eastern Europe, Yugoslav leaders early on had rejected Soviet domination of their internal affairs and charted their own independent road to socialism. Fearing that reform might lead to contagious defections from the communist bloc, Soviet forces actually invaded their supposed allies in Hungary (1956–1957) and Czechoslovakia (1968) to crush such movements. In the early 1980s, Poland was seriously threatened with a similar action. The brutal suppression of these reform movements gave credibility to Western perceptions of the cold war as a struggle between tyranny and freedom and badly tarnished the image of Soviet communism as a reasonable alternative to capitalism.

Even more startling, the two communist giants, the Soviet Union and China, found themselves sharply opposed, owing to territorial disputes, ideological differences, and rivalry for communist leadership. The Chinese bitterly criticized Khrushchev for backing down in the Cuban missile crisis, while to the Soviet leadership, Mao was insanely indifferent to the possible consequences of a nuclear war. In 1960, the Soviet Union backed away from an earlier promise to provide China with the prototype of an atomic bomb and abruptly withdrew all Soviet advisers and technicians, who had been assisting Chinese development. By the late 1960s, China on its own had developed a modest nuclear capability, and the two countries were at the brink of war, with the Soviet Union hinting at a possible nuclear strike on Chinese military targets. Their enmity certainly benefited the United States, which in the 1970s was able to pursue a "triangular diplomacy," easing tensions and simultaneously signing arms control agreements with the USSR and opening a formal relationship with China. Beyond this central conflict, a communist China in fact went to war against a communist Vietnam in 1979, while Vietnam invaded a communist Cambodia in the late 1970s.

## ■ Description

What were the strengths and weaknesses of the communist world by the 1970s?



Czechoslovakia, 1968

In August 1968, Soviet forces invaded Czechoslovakia, where a popular reform movement proclaiming “socialism with a human face” threatened to erode established communist control. The Soviet troops that crushed this so-called Prague Spring were greeted by thousands of peaceful street demonstrators begging them to go home. (AP Photo/Libor Hajsky/CTK)

Nationalism, in short, proved more powerful than communist solidarity, even in the face of cold war hostilities with the West.

Despite its many internal conflicts, world communism remained a powerful global presence during the 1970s, achieving its greatest territorial reach. China was emerging from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The Soviet Union had matched U.S. military might; in response, the Americans launched a major buildup of their own military forces in the early 1980s. Despite American hostility, Cuba remained a communist outpost in the Western Hemisphere, with impressive achievements in education and health care for its people. Communism triumphed in Vietnam, dealing a major setback to the United States. A number of African countries affirmed their commitment to Marxism. Few people anywhere expected that within two decades most of the twentieth century’s experiment with communism would be gone.

## Paths to the End of Communism

More rapidly than its beginning, and far more peacefully, the communist era came to an end during the last twenty years of the twentieth century. It was a drama in three acts. Act One began in China during the late 1970s, following the death of its towering revolutionary leader Mao Zedong in 1976. Over the next several decades, the CCP gradually abandoned almost everything that had been associated with Maoist communism, even as the party retained its political control of the country. Act Two took place in Eastern Europe in the “miracle year” of 1989, when popular movements toppled despised communist governments one after another all across the region. The climactic act in this “end of communism” drama occurred in 1991 in the Soviet Union, where the entire “play” had opened seventy-four years earlier. There the reformist leader Mikhail Gorbachev (GORE-beh-CHOF) had come to power in 1985 intending to revive and save Soviet socialism from its accumulated dysfunctions. Those efforts, however, only exacerbated the country’s many difficulties and led to the political disintegration of the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991. The curtain had fallen on the communist era and on the cold war as well.

Behind these separate stories lay two general failures of the communist experiment, measured both by their own standards and by those of the larger world. The first was economic. Despite their early successes, communist economies by the late 1970s showed no signs of catching up to the more advanced capitalist countries. The highly regimented Soviet economy in particular was largely stagnant; its citizens were forced to stand in long lines for consumer goods and complained endlessly about their poor quality and declining availability. This was enormously embarrassing, for it had been the proud boast of communist leaders everywhere that they had found a better route to modern prosperity than their capitalist rivals. Furthermore, these comparisons were increasingly well known, thanks to the global information revolution. They had security implications as well, for economic growth, even more than military capacity, was the measure of state power as the twentieth century approached its end.

The second failure was moral. The horrors of Stalin’s Terror and the gulag, of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, of something approaching genocide in communist Cambodia—all of this wore away at communist claims to moral superiority over capitalism. Moreover, this erosion occurred as global political culture more widely embraced democracy and human rights as the universal legacy of humankind, rather than the exclusive possession of the capitalist West. In both economic and moral terms, the communist path to the modern world was increasingly seen as a road to nowhere.

Communist leaders were not ignorant of these problems, and particularly in China and the Soviet Union, they moved aggressively to address them. But their approach to doing so varied greatly, as did the outcomes of those efforts. Thus, much as the Russian and Chinese revolutions differed and their approaches to building socialism diverged, so too did these communist giants chart distinct paths during the final years of the communist experiment.

### ■ Change

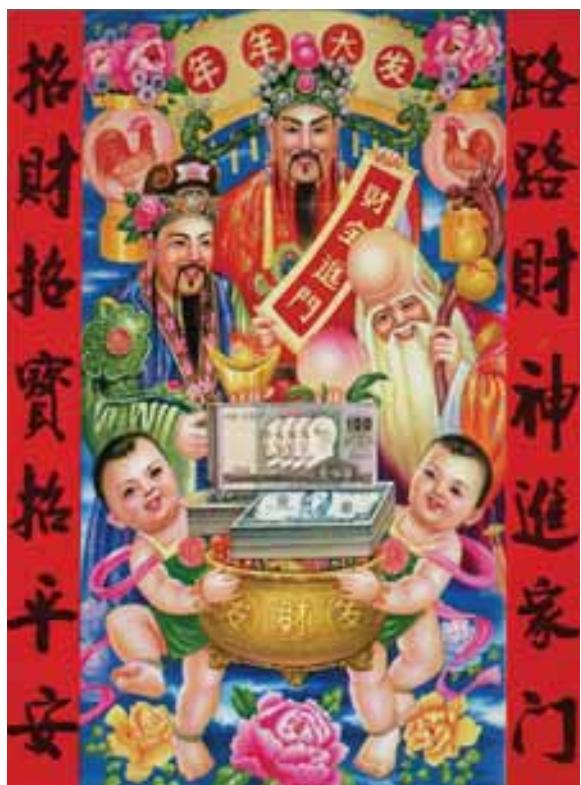
What explains the rapid end of the communist era?

## *China: Abandoning Communism and Maintaining the Party*

As the dust settled from the political shakeout following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping (dung shee-yao-ping) emerged as China's "paramount leader," committed to ending the periodic upheavals of the Maoist era while fostering political stability and economic growth. Soon previously banned plays, operas, films, and translations of Western classics reappeared, and a "literature of the wounded" exposed the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution. Some 100,000 political prisoners, many of them high-ranking communists, were released and restored to important positions. A party evaluation of Mao severely criticized his mistakes during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, while praising his role as a revolutionary leader.

Even more dramatic were Deng's economic reforms. In the rural areas, these reforms included a rapid dismantling of the country's system of collectivized farming and a return to something close to small-scale private agriculture. Impoverished Chinese peasants eagerly embraced these new opportunities and pushed them even further than the government had intended. Industrial reform proceeded more gradually. Managers of state enterprises were given greater authority and encouraged to act like private owners, making many of their own decisions and seeking profits. China opened itself to the world economy and welcomed foreign investment in special enterprise zones along the coast, where foreign capitalists received tax breaks and other inducements. Local governments and private entrepreneurs joined forces in thousands of flourishing "township and village enterprises" that produced food, clothing, building materials, and much more.

The outcome of these reforms was stunning economic growth and a new prosperity for millions. Better diets, lower mortality rates, declining poverty, massive urban construction, and surging exports—all of this accompanied China's rejoicing of the world economy and contributed to a much-improved material life for millions of its citizens. To many observers, China was the emerging economic giant of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, the country's burgeoning economy also generated massive corruption among Chinese officials, sharp inequalities between the coast and the interior, a huge problem of urban overcrowding, terrible pollution in major cities, and periodic inflation as the state



**After Communism in China**

Although the Communist Party still governed China in the early twenty-first century, communist values of selflessness, community, and simplicity had been substantially replaced for many by Western-style consumerism. This New Year's Good Luck poster from 1999 illustrates the new interest in material wealth in the form of American dollars and the return of older Chinese cultural patterns represented by the traditional gods of wealth, happiness, and longevity. The caption reads: "The gods of wealth enter the home from everywhere." (IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger collections <http://chineseposters.net>)

loosened its controls over the economy. Urban vices such as street crime, prostitution, gambling, drug addiction, and a criminal underworld, which had been largely eliminated after 1949, surfaced again in China's booming cities. Nonetheless, something remarkable had occurred in China: an essentially capitalist economy had been restored, and by none other than the Communist Party itself. Mao's worst fears had been realized, as China "took the capitalist road."

Although the party was willing to largely abandon communist economic policies, it was adamantly unwilling to relinquish its political monopoly or to promote democracy at the national level. "Talk about democracy in the abstract," Deng Xiaoping declared, "will inevitably lead to the unchecked spread of ultra-democracy and anarchism, to the complete disruption of political stability, and to the total failure of our modernization program. . . . China will once again be plunged into chaos, division, retrogression, and darkness."<sup>14</sup> Such attitudes associated democracy with the chaos and uncontrolled mass action of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, when a democracy movement spearheaded by university and secondary school students surfaced in the late 1980s, Deng ordered the brutal crushing of its brazen demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen Square before the television cameras of the world.

China entered the new millennium as a rapidly growing economic power with an essentially capitalist economy presided over by an intact and powerful Communist Party. Culturally, some combination of nationalism, consumerism, and a renewed respect for ancient traditions had replaced the collectivist and socialist values of the Maoist era. It was a strange and troubled hybrid.

## The Soviet Union: The Collapse of Communism and Country

By the mid-1980s, the reformist wing of the Soviet Communist Party, long squelched by an aging conservative establishment, had won the top position in the party as Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the role of general secretary. Like Deng Xiaoping in China, Gorbachev was committed to aggressively tackling the country's many problems—economic stagnation, a flourishing black market, public apathy, and cynicism about the party. His economic program, launched in 1987 and known as *perestroika* (per-uh-STROI-kuh) (restructuring), paralleled aspects of the Chinese approach by freeing state enterprises from the heavy hand of government regulation, permitting small-scale private businesses called cooperatives, offering opportunities for private farming, and cautiously welcoming foreign investment in joint enterprises.

But in cultural and political affairs, Gorbachev moved far beyond Chinese reforms. His policy of *glasnost* (GLAHS-nohst) (openness), now permitted an unprecedented range of cultural and intellectual freedoms. In the late 1980s, *glasnost* hit the Soviet Union like a bomb. Newspapers and TV exposed social pathologies—crime, prostitution, child abuse, suicide, corruption, and homelessness—that previously had been presented solely as the product of capitalism. Films broke the ban on nudity and explicit sex. TV reporters climbed the wall of a secluded villa to film the luxurious

■ **Comparison**  
How did the end of communism in the Soviet Union differ from communism's demise in China?

homes of the party elite. Soviet history was also reexamined as revelations of Stalin's crimes poured out of the media. The Bible and the Quran became more widely available, atheistic propaganda largely ceased, and thousands of churches and mosques were returned to believers and opened for worship. Plays, poems, films, and novels that had long been buried "in the drawer" were now released to a public that virtually devoured them. "Like an excited boy reads a note from his girl," wrote one poet, "that's how we read the papers today."<sup>15</sup> And beyond glasnost lay democratization and a new parliament with real powers, chosen in competitive elections. When those elections occurred in 1989, dozens of leading communists were rejected at the polls. In foreign affairs, Gorbachev moved to end the cold war by making unilateral cuts in Soviet military forces, engaging in arms control negotiations with the United States, and refusing to intervene as communist governments in Eastern Europe were overthrown.

But almost nothing worked out as Gorbachev had anticipated. Far from strengthening socialism and reviving a stagnant Soviet Union, the reforms led to its further weakening and collapse. In a dramatic contrast with China's booming economy, the Soviet Union spun into a sharp decline as its planned economy was dismantled before a functioning market-based system could emerge. Inflation mounted; consumer goods were in short supply, and ration coupons reappeared; many feared the loss of their jobs. Unlike Chinese peasants, few Soviet farmers were willing to risk the jump into private farming, and few foreign investors found the Soviet Union a tempting place to do business.

Furthermore, the new freedoms provoked demands that went far beyond what Gorbachev had intended. A democracy movement of unofficial groups and parties now sprang to life, many of them seeking a full multiparty democracy and a market-based economy. They were joined by independent labor unions, which actually went on strike, something unheard of in the "workers' state." Most corrosively, a multitude of nationalist movements used the new freedoms to insist on greater autonomy, or even independence, from the Soviet Union. In the face of these mounting demands, Gorbachev resolutely refused to use force to crush the protesters, another sharp contrast with the Chinese experience.

Events in Eastern Europe now intersected with those in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's reforms had lit a fuse in these Soviet satellites, where communism had been imposed and maintained from outside. If the USSR could practice glasnost and hold competitive elections, why not Eastern Europe as well? This was the background for the "miracle year" of 1989. Massive demonstrations, last-minute efforts at reforms, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the surfacing of new political groups—all of this and more quickly overwhelmed the highly unpopular communist regimes of Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, which were quickly swept away. This success then emboldened nationalists and democrats in the Soviet Union. If communism had been overthrown in Eastern Europe, perhaps it could be overthrown in the USSR as well. Soviet conservatives and patriots, however, were

outraged. To them, Gorbachev had stood idly by while the political gains of World War II, for which the Soviet Union had paid in rivers of blood, vanished before their eyes. It was nothing less than treason.

A brief and unsuccessful attempt to restore the old order through a military coup in August 1991 triggered the end of the Soviet Union and its communist regime. From the wreckage there emerged fifteen new and independent states, following the internal political divisions of the USSR (see Map 21.4).

The Soviet collapse represented a unique phenomenon in the world of the late twentieth century. Simultaneously, the world's largest state and its last territorial empire vanished; the world's first Communist Party disintegrated; a powerful command economy broke down; an official socialist ideology was repudiated; and a forty-five-year global struggle between the East and the West ended. In Europe, Germany was reunified, and a number of former communist states joined NATO and the European Union, ending the division of the continent. At least for the moment, capitalism and democracy seemed to triumph over socialism and authoritarian governments. In many places, the end of communism allowed simmering ethnic tensions to explode into open conflict. Beyond the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia fragmented, the former amid terrible violence and the latter peacefully. Chechens in Russia, Abkhazians in Georgia, Russians in the Baltic states

**Map 21.4** The Collapse of the Soviet Empire  
Soviet control over its Eastern European dependencies vanished as those countries threw off their communist governments in 1989. Then, in 1991, the Soviet Union itself disintegrated into fifteen separate states, none of them governed by communist parties.



and Ukraine, Tibetans and Uighurs in China—all of these minorities found themselves in opposition to the states in which they lived.

As the twenty-first century dawned, the communist world had shrunk considerably from its high point just three decades earlier. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, communism had disappeared entirely as the governing authority and dominant ideology. China had largely abandoned its communist economic policies as a market economy took shape. Like China, Vietnam and Laos remained officially communist, even while they pursued Chinese-style reforms, though more cautiously. Even Cuba, which was beset by economic crisis in the 1990s after massive Soviet subsidies ended, allowed small businesses, private food markets, and tourism to grow, while harshly suppressing opposition political groups. By 2011 a growing cultural openness allowed films highly critical of Cuban society to be produced and shown publically, including one, “Juan of the Dead,” that portrayed Cuba as a country of dazed zombies. Cubans were increasingly engaged in private enterprise, able to buy and sell cars and houses, and enthusiastically embracing mobile phones and computers. An impoverished North Korea remained the most unreformed and repressive of the remaining communist countries.

International tensions born of communism remained only in East Asia and the Caribbean. North Korea’s threat to develop nuclear weapons posed a serious international issue. Continuing tension between China and Taiwan as well as between the United States and Cuba were hangovers from the cold war era. But either as a primary source of international conflict or as a compelling path to modernity and social justice, communism was effectively dead. The brief communist era in world history had ended.

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## Reflections: To Judge or Not to Judge

Should historians or students of history make moral judgments about the people and events they study? On the one hand, some would argue, scholars do well to act as detached and objective observers of the human experience. The task is to describe what happened and to explain why things turned out as they did. Whether we approve or condemn the outcomes of the historical process is, in this view, beside the point. On the other hand, all of us, scholars and students alike, stand somewhere. We are members of particular cultures; we have values and outlooks on the world that inevitably affect the way we think about the past. Perhaps it is better to recognize and acknowledge these limitations than to pretend to some unattainable objectivity that places us above it all. Furthermore, making judgments is a way of caring about the past, of affirming our continuing relationship with those who have gone before us.

The question of making judgments arises strongly in any examination of the communist phenomenon. In a United States lacking a major socialist tradition, sometimes saying anything positive about communism or even noting its appeal to millions of people has brought charges of whitewashing its crimes. Within the communist

world, even modest criticism was usually regarded as counterrevolutionary and was largely forbidden and harshly punished. Certainly few observers were neutral in their assessment of the communist experiment.

Were the Russian and Chinese revolutions a blow for human freedom and a cry for justice on the part of oppressed people, or did they simply replace one tyranny with another? Was Stalinism a successful effort to industrialize a backward country or a ferocious assault on its moral and social fabric? Did Chinese reforms of the late twentieth century represent a return to sensible policies of modernization, a continued denial of basic democratic rights, or an opening to capitalist inequalities, corruption, and acquisitiveness? Passionate debate continues on all of these questions.

Communism, like many human projects, has been an ambiguous enterprise. On the one hand, communism brought hope to millions by addressing the manifest injustices of the past; by providing new opportunities for women, workers, and peasants; by promoting rapid industrial development; and by ending Western domination. On the other hand, communism was responsible for mountains of crimes—millions killed and wrongly imprisoned; massive famines partly caused by radical policies; human rights violated on an enormous scale; lives uprooted and distorted by efforts to achieve the impossible.

Studying communism challenges our inclination to want definitive answers and clear moral judgments. Can we hold contradictory elements in some kind of tension? Can we affirm our own values while acknowledging the ambiguities of life, both past and present? Doing so is arguably among the essential tasks of growing up and achieving a measure of intellectual maturity. In that undertaking, history can be helpful.

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

Russian Revolution (1917), 1039–42  
Bolsheviks/Lenin, 1040–41  
Guomindang, 1042  
Mao Zedong, 1042–43  
Chinese Revolution, 1043–45  
Stalin, 1045; 1047–50  
building socialism, 1045–51  
Zhenotdel, 1046–47  
collectivization, 1048

Cultural Revolution, 1051  
Great Purges/Terror, 1052–53  
Anna Dubova, 1052–53  
Cuban missile crisis, 1056  
Nikita Khrushchev, 1056–59  
Deng Xiaoping, 1062–63  
perestroika/glasnost, 1063  
Mikhail Gorbachev, 1063–65

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### Big Picture Questions

1. Why did the communist experiment, which was committed to equality, abundance, and a humane socialism, generate such oppressive, brutal, and totalitarian regimes and failed economies?

2. In what ways did communism have a global impact beyond those countries that were governed by communist parties?
3. What was the global significance of the cold war?
4. “The end of communism was as revolutionary as its beginning.” Do you agree with this statement?
5. **Looking Back:** What was distinctive about twentieth-century communist industrialization and modernization compared to the same processes in the West a century earlier?

For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

### Next Steps: For Further Study

Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (2009). A global overview of the communist phenomenon in the twentieth century by a respected scholar.

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans* (2004). A compelling view of twentieth-century Chinese history through the eyes of three generations of women in a single family.

Timothy Check, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions* (2002). A collection of documents about the Chinese Revolution and a fine introduction to the life of Mao.

John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (2005). An overview by one of the most highly regarded historians of the cold war.

Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (1999). A thoughtful overview of the entire Soviet experience.

Robert Strayer, *The Communist Experiment* (2007). A comparative study of Soviet and Chinese communism.

“Mao Zedong Reference Archive,” <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao>. A Web site offering the translated writings of Mao, including poetry and some images.

“Soviet Archives Exhibit,” <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet.exhibit/entrance.html>. A rich Web site from the Library of Congress, focusing on the operation of the Soviet system and relations with the United States.

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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Experiencing Stalinism



For the Soviet Union, the formative period in establishing communism encompassed the years of Joseph Stalin's rule (1929–1953). Born in Georgia in 1878, rather than in Russia itself, the young Stalin grew up with a brutal and abusive father, trained for the priesthood as a young man, but slowly gravitated toward the emerging revolutionary movement of the time. He subsequently joined the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, though he played only a modest role in the Russian Revolution of 1917. After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin rose to the dominant position in the Communist Party amid a long and bitter struggle among the Bolsheviks. By 1929 he had consolidated his authority and exercised enormous personal power until his death in 1953.

To Stalin and the Soviet leadership, the 1930s was a time of "building socialism." Undertaking that gigantic task meant upheaval on an enormous scale, offering undreamed of opportunities for some and disruption and trauma beyond imagination for others. The documents that follow allow us to see something of the Stalinist vision for the country as well as to gain some insight into the lives of ordinary people—peasants, workers, women, ethnic minorities, the young, and the upwardly mobile—as they experienced what historians have come to call simply "Stalinism."

### Document 21.1

#### Stalin on Stalinism

In January 1933, Stalin appeared before a group of high-ranking party officials to give a report on the achievements of the country's first five-year plan for overall development. The years encompassed by that plan, roughly 1928–1932, coincided with Stalin's rise to the position of supreme leader within the governing Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

- What larger goals for the country underlay Stalin's report? Why did he believe those goals had to be achieved so rapidly?

- To what indications of success did Stalin point? Which of these claims do you find most and least credible?
- What criticisms of Stalin's policies can you infer from the document?
- What do you think Stalin meant when he referred to the "world-wide historic significance" of the Soviet Union's achievement? Keep in mind what was happening in the capitalist world at the time.

JOSEPH STALIN  
***The Results of the First Five-Year Plan***  
 1933

The fundamental task of the five-year plan was to convert the U.S.S.R. . . . into an industrial and powerful country, fully self-reliant and independent of the caprices of world capitalism, . . . to completely oust the capitalist elements, to widen the front of socialist forms of economy, and to create the economic basis for the abolition of classes in the U.S.S.R., for the building of a socialist society. . . .

Let us pass now to the results of the fulfillment of the five-year plan. . . .

We did not have an iron and steel industry, the basis for the industrialization of the country. Now we have one.

*[Stalin follows with a long list of new industries developed during the first five-year plan: tractors, automobiles, machine tools, chemicals, agricultural machinery, electric power, oil and coal, metals.]*

And we have not only created these new great industries, but have created them on a scale and in dimensions that eclipse . . . European industry.

And as a result of all this the capitalist elements have been completely and irrevocably ousted from industry, and socialist industry has become the sole form of industry in the U.S.S.R. . . .

Finally, as a result of all this the Soviet Union has been converted from a weak country, unprepared for defense, into a country mighty in defense . . . ,

a country capable of producing on a mass scale all modern means of defense and of equipping its army with them in the event of an attack from abroad.

We are told: This is all very well; many new factories have been built, and the foundations for industrialization have been laid; but it would have been far better . . . to produce more cotton fabrics, shoes, clothing, and other goods for mass consumption. . . . Then we would now have more cotton fabrics, shoes, and clothing. But we would not have a tractor industry or an automobile industry; we would not have anything like a big iron and steel industry; we would not have metal for the manufacture of machinery—and we would remain unarmed while encircled by capitalist countries armed with modern technique. . . .

It was necessary to urge forward a country which was a hundred years behindhand and which was faced with mortal danger because of its backwardness. . . .

The five-year plan in the sphere of agriculture was a five-year plan of collectivization. . . . [I]t was necessary in addition to industrialization, to pass from small, individual peasant farming to . . . large collective farms, equipped with all the modern implements of highly developed agriculture, and to cover unoccupied land with model state farms. . . .

The Party has succeeded in routing the kulaks<sup>o</sup> as a class, although they have not yet been dealt the

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Source: Joseph Stalin, "The Results of the First Five-Year Plan," *Pravda*, January 10, 1933.

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<sup>o</sup>**kulaks:** relatively rich peasants.

final blow; the laboring peasants have been emancipated from kulak bondage and exploitation, and the Soviet regime has been given a firm economic basis in the countryside, the basis of collective farming.

In our country, the workers have long forgotten unemployment.... Look at the capitalist countries: what horrors result there from unemployment! There are now no less than 30–40 million unemployed in those countries....

The same thing must be said of the peasants.... It has brought them into the collective farms and

placed them in a secure position. It has thus eliminated the possibility of the differentiation of the peasantry into exploiters—kulaks—and exploited—poor peasants—and abolished destitution in the countryside.... Now the peasant is in a position of security, a member of a collective farm which has at its disposal tractors, agricultural machinery, seed funds, reserve funds....

[W]e have achieved such important successes as to evoke admiration among the working class all over the world; we have achieved a victory that is truly of world-wide historic significance.

### Document 21.2

## Living through Collectivization

For Russian peasants, and those of other nationalities as well, the chief experience of Stalinism was collectivization—the enforced bringing together of many small-scale family farms into much larger collective farms called *kolhozy*. Thus private ownership of land was largely ended, except for some small plots, which peasants could till individually. That process generally began with the arrival of outside “agitators” or Community Party officials who sought to persuade, or if necessary to force, the villagers to enter the *kolhoz*. They divided peasants (*muzhiks*) into class categories: rich peasants (*kulaks*) were to be excluded from the collective farms as incipient capitalists; poor (*bedniak*) and middle (*seredniak*) peasants were expected to join.

One witness to this process was Maurice Hindus, a Russian-born American writer who returned to his country of origin in 1929, when Soviet collectivization was beginning in earnest. There he roamed on foot around the countryside, recording conversations with those he met. The extract that follows begins with a letter he received from “Nadya,” a young activist who was among many sent to the rural areas to initiate collectivization. Then Hindus records a discussion between peasants objecting to collectivization and an “agitator,” like Nadya, seeking to convince them of its benefits.

- How do Nadya and the “agitator” understand collectivization and their role in this process? Why do they believe that it was so critical to building socialism?
- How do village peasants view collectivization? On what grounds do they object to it? How might they view the role of the agitators?
- How did the peasants understand themselves and their village community? How did they respond to the communists’ insistence on defining them

in rigid class terms? Why do you think they finally entered the collective farms?

- Why were Stalin and the Communist Party so insistent on destroying the *kulaks*?

MAURICE HINDUS

## *Red Bread*

1931

### Nadya Speaks

I am off in villages with a group of other brigadiers organizing *kolhozy*. It is a tremendous job, but we are making amazing progress. It would do you worlds of good to be with us and watch us draw the stubborn peasant into collectivization. Contrary to all your affirmations and prophecies, our *muzhik* is yielding to persuasion. He is joining the *kolhoz*, and I am confident that in time not a peasant will remain on his own land. We shall yet smash the last vestiges of capitalism and forever rid ourselves of exploitation. . . . The very air here is afire with a new spirit and a new energy.

### The Peasants Speak

“There was a time,”. . . began Lukyan, who had been a blacksmith, . . . “when we were just neighbors in this village. We quarreled, we fooled, sometimes we cheated one another. But we were neighbors. Now we are *bedniaks*, *seredniaks*, *koolacks*.<sup>o</sup> I am a *seredniak*, Boris here is a *bedniak*, and Nisko is a *koolack*, and we are supposed to have a class war—pull each other’s hair or tickle each other on the toes, eh? One against the other, you understand? . . .

“But it is other things that worry us,” continued the flat-faced *muzhik* . . . , “it is the *kolhoz*. That, citizen, is a serious matter—the most serious we have ever encountered. Who ever heard of such a thing—to give up our land and our cows and our horses

<sup>o</sup>**koolacks:** variant spelling of *kulaks*.

Source: Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1, 22–34.

and our tools and our farm buildings, to work all the time and divide everything with others? Nowadays members of the same family get in each other’s way and quarrel and fight, and here we, strangers, are supposed to be like one family. . . .

“We won’t even be sure,” someone else continued the lament, “of having enough bread to eat. Now, however poor we may be, we have our own rye and our own potatoes and our own cucumbers and our own milk. We know we won’t starve. But in the *kolhoz*, no more potatoes of our own, no more anything of our own. Everything will be rationed out by orders; we shall be like mere *batraks*<sup>o</sup> on the landlord’s estates in the old days. Serfdom—that is what it is—and who wants to be a serf?” . . .

“Dark-minded beasts we may be,” wailed another *muzhik* . . . . “We are not learned; we are not wise. But a little self-respect we have, and we like the feeling of independence. Today we feel like working, and we work; tomorrow we feel like lying down, and we lie down; the next day we feel like going to town, and we go to town. We do as we please. But in the *kolhoz*, brother, it is do-as-you-are-told, like a horse—go this way and that, and don’t dare turn off the road or you get it hard, a stroke or two of the whip on bare flesh. . . . We’ll just wither away on the socialist farm, like grass torn out by the roots.” . . .

### The Communist Party Official Speaks

At this point a new visitor arrived, a tall youth, in boots, in a black blouse and with a shaved head. . . .

<sup>o</sup>**batraks:** hired help.

A stranger in the village, he was the organizer of the *kolhoz*, therefore a person of stern importance. . . .

"Everything is possible, grandfather, if we all pool our resources and our powers together," replied the visitor.

More laughter and more derisive comment. . . .

"Tell me, you wretched people, what hope is there for you if you remain on individual pieces of land? Think, and don't interrupt. . . . From year to year as you increase in population you divide and subdivide your strips of land. You cannot even use machinery on your land because no machine man ever made could stand the rough ridges that the strip system creates. You will have to work in your own old way and stew in your old misery. Don't you see that under your present system there is nothing ahead of you but ruin and starvation? . . . You do not think of a future, often, twenty, a hundred years from now, and we do. That's the difference between you and us. The coming generations mean nothing to you. Else you would see a real deliverance in the *kolhoz*, where you will work with machinery in a modern organized way, with the best seeds obtainable and under the direction of experts. . . . Isn't it about time you stopped thinking each one for him-

self, for his own piggish hide? You *koolacks* of course will never become reconciled to a new order. You love to fatten on other people's blood. But we know how to deal with you. We'll wipe you off the face of the earth, even as we have the capitalists in the city. Make no mistake about our intentions and our powers. We shan't allow you to profit from the weakness of the *bedniak*. And we shan't allow you to poison his mind, either! Enough. But the others here—you *bedniaks* and you *seredniaks*—what have you gained from this stiff-necked individualism of yours? What? Look at yourselves, at your homes—mud, squalor, fleas, bedbugs, cockroaches, *lapti*.<sup>o</sup> Are you sorry to let these go? Oh, we know you *muzhiks*—too well. . . . You can whine eloquently and pitifully. . . . But we know you—you cannot fool us. We have grown hardened to your wails. Remember that. Cry all you want to, curse all you want to. You won't hurt us, and I warn you that we shan't desist. We shall continue our campaign for the *kolhozy* until we have won our goal and made you free citizens in a free land."

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<sup>o</sup>**lapti:** cheap wooden shoes.

### Document 21.3

## Living through Industrialization

Another major feature of the Stalinist era was rapid state-controlled industrialization. "We are fifty to a hundred years behind the advanced countries," declared Stalin. "We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we shall do it or we shall go under." During the 1930s, that enormous process brought huge numbers of peasants from the countryside to the cities. Many found their way to new and distant industrial sites such as Magnitogorsk—a huge new iron and steel enterprise, and millions entered recently established technical institutes where they learned new skills and nurtured new ambitions. The brief excerpts in Document 21.3 disclose the voices of some of these workers as they celebrated the new possibilities and lamented the disappointments and injustices of Stalinist industrialization. These sources come from letters written to newspapers or to high government officials, from private letters and diaries, or from reports filed by party officials based on what they had heard in the factories.

- In what respects did Soviet workers benefit from Stalinist industrialization?
- What criticisms were voiced in these extracts? Do they represent fundamental opposition to the idea of socialism or disappointments in how it was implemented?
- Which of these selections do you find most credible?
- Through its control of education and the media, the Stalinist regime sought to instill a single view of the world in its citizens. Based on these selections, to what extent had they succeeded or failed?

## Personal Accounts of Soviet Industrialization

1930s

### **Letter in a Newspaper from a Tatar Electrician**

I am a Tatar.<sup>°</sup> . . . [I]n old tsarist Russia, we weren't even considered people. We couldn't even dream about education, or getting a job in a state enterprise. And now I'm a citizen of the USSR. Like all citizens, I have the right to a job, to education, to leisure. I can elect and be elected to the soviet [legislative council]. Is this not an indication of the supreme achievements of our country? . . .

Two years ago I worked as the chairman of a village soviet in the Tatar republic. I was the first person there to enter the kolhoz and then I led the collectivization campaign. Collective farming is flourishing with each year in the Tatar republic.

In 1931 I came to Magnitogorsk. From a common laborer I have turned into a skilled worker. I was elected a member of the city soviet. As a deputy, every day I receive workers who have questions or need help. I listen to each one like to my own brother, and try to do what is necessary to make each one satisfied.

<sup>°</sup>Tatar: a Turkic ethnic group.

Source: First and second selections: Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 221–22, 349–50; third through seventh selections: Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39, 72, 134–35, 139, 173–74.

I live in a country where one feels like living and learning. And if the enemy should attack this country, I will sacrifice my life in order to destroy the enemy and save my country.

### **Newspaper Commentary by an Engineer, 1938**

Soon it will be seven years that I'm working in Magnitogorsk. With my own eyes I've seen the pulsating, creative life of the builders of the Magnitogorsk giant. I myself have taken an active part in this construction with great enthusiasm. Our joy was great when we obtained the first Magnitogorsk steel from the wonderful open-hearth ovens. At the time there was no greater happiness for me than working in the open-hearth shop. . . . Here I enriched my theoretical knowledge and picked up practical habits . . . of work. Here as well I grew politically, acquired good experience in public-political work. I came to Magnitogorsk nonparty. The party organization . . . accepted me into a group of sympathizers. Not long ago I entered the ranks of the Leninist-Stalinist [communist] party. . . . I love my hometown Magnitka with all my heart. I consider my work at the Magnitogorsk factory to be a special honor and high trust shown to me, a Soviet engineer, by the country.

### **Letter to a Soviet Official from a Worker, 1938**

In fact, there's been twenty years of our [Soviet] power. Fifteen to sixteen of these have been peaceful construction. . . . The people struggled with zeal, overcame difficulties. Socialism has been built in

the main. As we embark on the third five-year plan we shout at meetings, congresses, and in newspapers "Hurray, we have reached a happy, joyful life!" However, incidentally, if one is to be honest, those shouts are mechanical, made from habit, pumped by social organizations. The ordinary person makes such speeches like a street newspaper-seller. In fact, in his heart, when he comes home, this bawler, eulogist, will agree with his family, his wife who reproaches him that today she has been torturing herself in queues and did not get anything—there are no suits, no coats, no meat, no butter.

### **Letter from a Student to His Teacher, No Date**

I worked at a factory for five years. Now I'll have to leave my studies at the institute. Who will study? Very talented Lomonosovs<sup>o</sup> and the sons of Soviet rulers, since they have the highest posts and are the best paid. In this way education will be available only to the highest strata (a sort of nobility), while for the lowest strata, the laboring people, the doors will be closed.

### **Two Comments from Factory Workers Found in Soviet Archives, 1930s**

What is there to say about the successes of Soviet power? It's lies. The newspapers cover up the real state of things. I am a worker, wear torn clothes, my four children go to school half-starving, in rags. I, an

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<sup>o</sup>**Lomonosovs:** i.e., brilliant students (Mikhail Lomonosov, 1711–1765, was a Russian scientist and writer).

honest worker, am a visible example of what Soviet power has given the workers in the last twenty years.

How can we liquidate classes, if new classes have developed here, with the only difference being that they are not called classes? Now there are the same parasites who live at the expense of others. The worker produces and at the same time works for many people who live off him. From the example of our factory it is clear that there is a huge apparatus of factory administrators, where idlers sit. There are many administrative workers who travel about in cars and get three to four times more than the worker. These people live in the best conditions and live at the expense of the labor of the working class.

### **Entry from a Worker's Diary, 1936**

[T]he portraits of party leaders are now displayed the same way icons used to be: a round portrait framed and attached to a pole. Very convenient, hoist it onto your shoulder and you're on your way. And all these preparations are just like what people used to do before church holidays....They had their own activists then, we have ours now. Different paths, the same old folderol.

### **Comment from an Anonymous Communist in Soviet Archives, 1938**

Do you not think that comrade Stalin's name has begun to be very much abused? ....Everything is Stalin, Stalin, Stalin. You only have to listen to a radio program about our achievements, and every fifth or tenth word will be the name of comrade Stalin. In the end this sacred and beloved name—Stalin—may make so much noise in people's heads that it is very possible that it will have the opposite effect.

## **Document 21.4**

### **Living through the Terror**

More than anything else, it was the Terror—sometimes called the Great Purges—that came to define Stalinism as a distinctive phenomenon in the history of Soviet communism (see p. 1052). Millions of people were caught up in this vast process of identifying and eliminating so-called enemies of the people, many of them loyal communist citizens. The three selections that follow,

all from women, provide a small taste of what it meant to experience arrest and interrogation, life in the camps of the Gulag, and the agony of those left behind waiting for loved ones who had vanished into the Terror.

- What might you infer from these selections about the purposes of the Terror, the means by which it was implemented, and its likely outcomes, whether intended or not?
- Many innocent people who were arrested believed that others were guilty as charged, while in their own case a mistake had been made. How might you account for this widespread response to the Terror?
- In what different ways did people experience the Stalinist Terror? What do you think motivated each of these women who wrote about it?
- The extent of the Terror did not become widely known until well after Stalin's death in 1953. How do you imagine that knowledge was used by critics of communism? What impact might it have had on those who had ardently believed in the possibilities of a socialist future?
- How might you compare the Soviet Terror and the Nazi Holocaust?

## *Personal Accounts of the Terror*

1930s

[The first excerpt is from the memoirs of Irina Kakhovskaya, an ardent revolutionary, though not a party member, who was arrested in 1937 and spent seventeen years either in prison or in a labor camp. Here she describes her arrest and interrogation.]

Early on the morning of February 8, 1937, a large group of men appeared at the door of our quiet apartment in Ufa. We were shown a search warrant and warrants for our arrest. The search was carried out in violent, pogrom-like fashion and lasted all day. Books went pouring down from the shelves; letters and papers, out of boxes. They tapped the walls

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Source: First selection: Irina Kakhovskaya, "Our Fate" in *An End to Silence*, translated by George Saunders and edited by Stephen Cohen (New York: Norton, 1982), 81–90; second selection: Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 366–67; third selection: Anna Akhmatova, *Poems*, selected and translated by Lyn Coffin (New York: Norton, 1983), 82, 85.

and, when they encountered hollow spots, removed the bricks. Everything was covered with dust and pieces of brick....

At the prison everything was aimed at breaking prisoners' spirits immediately, intimidating and stupefying them, making them feel that they were no longer human, but "enemies of the people," against whom everything was permitted. All elementary human needs were disregarded (light, air, food, rest, medical care, warmth, toilet facilities)....

In the tiny, damp, cold, half-lit cell were a bunk and a half bunk. The bunk was for the prisoner under investigation and on the half bunk, their legs drawn up, the voluntary victims, the informers from among the common criminals, huddled together. Their duty was never to let their neighbor out of their sight, never to let the politicals communicate with one another... and above all to prevent the politicals from committing suicide.... The air was fouled by the huge wooden latrine bucket....

The interrogation began on the very first night.... Using threats, endearments, promises and

enigmatic hints, they tried to confuse, wear down, frighten, and break the will of each individual, who was kept totally isolated from his or her comrades. . . . Later stools were removed and the victim had to simply stand for hours on end. . . .

At first it seemed that the whole thing was a tremendous and terrible misunderstanding, that it was our duty to clear it up. . . . But it soon became apparent that what was involved was deliberate ill will and the most cynical possible approach to the truth. . . .

In the interrogation sessions, I now had several investigators in a row, and the “conveyor belt” questioning would go on for six days and nights on end. . . . Exhaustion reached the ultimate limit. The brain, inadequately supplied with blood, began to malfunction. . . . “Sign! We won’t bother you anymore. We’ll give you a quiet cell and a pillow and you can sleep. . . .” That was how the investigator would try to bribe a person who was completely debilitated and stupefied from lack of sleep.

Each of us fought alone to keep an honest name and save the honor of our friends, although it would have been far easier to die than to endure this hell month after month. Nevertheless the accused remained strong in spirit and, apart from the unfortunate Mayorov, not one real revolutionary did they manage to break.

*[The second selection comes from the memoirs of Eugenia Ginsberg, a woman who survived many years in perhaps the most notorious of the gulag camps—Kolyma in the frigid northeastern corner of the Soviet Union. In this selection, Ginsberg recounts an ordinary day in the camps.]*

The work to which I was assigned . . . went by the imposing name of “land improvement.” We set out before dawn and marched in ranks of five for about three miles, to the accompaniment of shouts from the guards and bad language from the common criminals who were included in our party as a punishment for some misdeed or other. In time we reached a bleak, open field where our leader, another common criminal called Senka—a disgusting type who preyed on the other prisoners and made no bones about offering a pair of warm breeches in

return for an hour’s “fun and games”—handed out picks and iron spades with which we attacked the frozen soil of Kolyma until one in the afternoon. I cannot remember, and perhaps I never knew, the rational purpose this “improvement” was supposed to serve. I only remember the ferocious wind, the forty-degree frost, the appalling weight of the pick, and the wild, irregular thumping of one’s heart. At one o’clock we were marched back for dinner. More stumbling in and out of snowdrifts, more shouts and threats from the guards whenever we fell out of line. Back in the camp we received our longed-for piece of bread and soup and were allowed half an hour in which to huddle around the stove in the hope of absorbing enough warmth to last us halfway back to the field. After we had toiled again with our picks and spades till late in the evening, Senka would come and survey what we had done and abuse us for not doing more. How could the assignment ever be completed if we spoiled women fulfilled only thirty percent of the norm? . . . Finally a night’s rest, full of nightmares, and the dreaded banging of a hammer on an iron rail which was the signal for a new day to begin.

*[The third selection is from the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, probably Russia’s most famous modern poet. In this poem, “Requiem,” Akhmatova writes passionately about endlessly standing in line, either seeking information about her imprisoned son or trying to send him parcels, an experience that paralleled that of countless other mothers and wives during the Terror.]*

In the awful years of Yezhovian horror,<sup>o</sup> I spent seventeen months standing in line in front of various prisons in Leningrad. One day someone “recognized” me. Then a woman with blue lips, who was standing behind me, and who, of course, had never heard my name, came out of the stupor which typified all of us, and whispered into my ear (everyone there spoke only in whispers):

—Can you describe this?

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<sup>o</sup>**Yezhovian horror:** i.e., the Terror (Nikolay Yezhov, 1895–1939, a communist official, administered the most severe stage of the purges).

And I said:

—I can.

Then something like a fleeting smile passed over what once had been her face.

For months I've filled the air with pleas,  
Trying to call you back.

I've thrown myself at the hangman's knees,  
You are my son and my rack....

I've seen how a face can fall like a leaf,  
How, from under the lids, terror peeks,

I've seen how suffering and grief  
Etches hieroglyphs on cheeks,  
How ash-blonde hair, from roots to tips,  
Turns black and silver overnight.  
How smiles wither on submissive lips,  
And in a half-smile quivers fright.  
Not only for myself do I pray,  
But for those who stood in front and  
behind me,  
In the bitter cold, on a hot July day  
Under the red wall that stared blindly.

## Using the Evidence: Experiencing Stalinism

- 1. Defending Stalinism:** Develop an argument that the fundamental goals of Stalinism (building socialism) were largely achieved during the 1930s.
- 2. Criticizing Stalinism:** Develop an argument that genuine socialism was essentially betrayed or perverted by the developments of the Stalin era.
- 3. Assessing change:** In what ways did the Stalin era represent a revolutionary transformation of Soviet society? In what ways did it continue older patterns of Russian history?
- 4. Considering moral judgments:** Why do you think that historians have found it so difficult to write about the Stalin era without passing judgment on it? Does this represent a serious problem for scholars? Should students of the past seek to avoid moral judgments or is it an inevitable, perhaps even useful, part of the historian's craft?

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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: Poster Art in Mao's China



“I wanted to be the girl in the poster when I was growing up. Every day I dressed up like that girl in a white cotton shirt with a red scarf around my neck, and I braided my hair in the same way. I liked the fact that she was surrounded by revolutionary martyrs whom I was taught to worship since kindergarten.”<sup>16</sup> As things turned out, this young girl, Anchee Min, did become the subject of one of the many thousands of propaganda posters with which the Chinese communist government flooded the country during the thirty years or so following the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

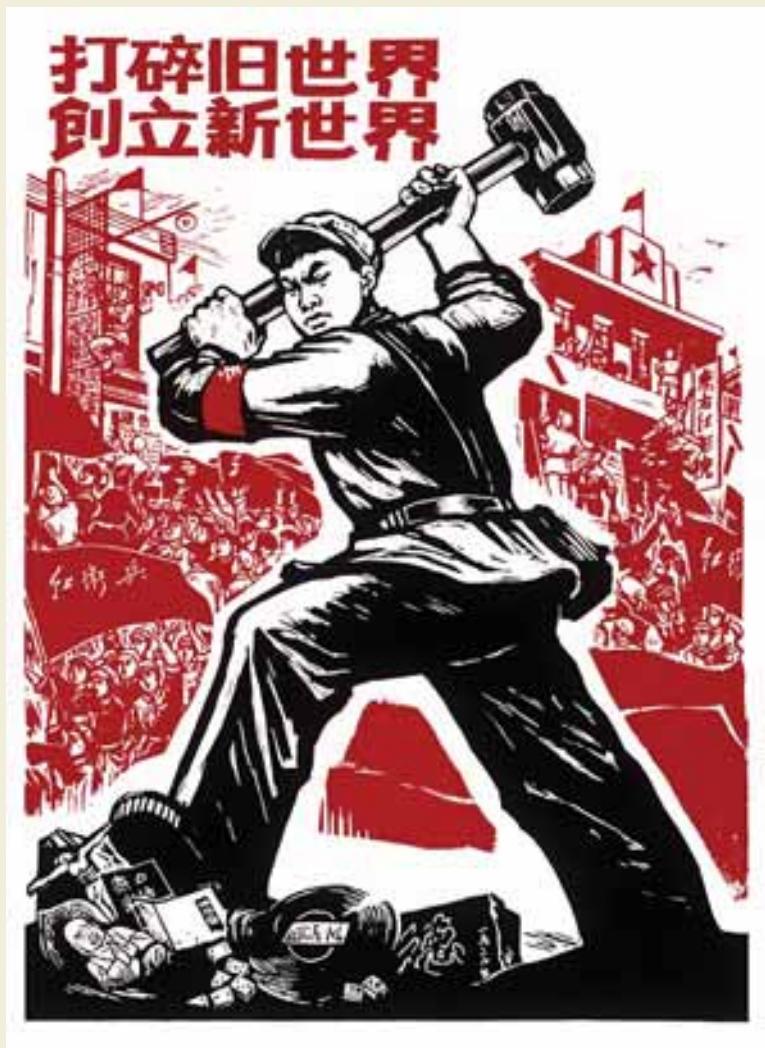
In China, as in other communist countries, art served the state and the Communist Party. Nowhere was this more apparent than in these propaganda posters, which were found in homes, schools, workplaces, railway stations, and elsewhere. The artists who created these images were under the strict control of Communist Party officials and were expected to use their skills to depict the party’s leaders and achievements favorably, even grandly. They were among the “engineers of the human soul” who were reshaping the consciousness of individuals and remaking their entire society. One young man, born in 1951, testified to the effectiveness of these posters: “They . . . were my signposts through life. They made sure we did not make mistakes. . . . [M]y life is reflected in them.”<sup>17</sup>

The posters that follow illustrate the kind of society and people that the communist leadership sought to create during the years that Mao Zedong ruled the country (1949–1976). The realities behind these images, of course, were often far different.

Coming to power in 1949, Chinese Communist Party leaders recognized that their enemies were by no means totally defeated. A persistent theme throughout the years of Mao’s rule was an effort to eliminate those enemies or convert them to the communist cause. Spies, imperialist sympathizers, those infected with “bourgeois values” such as materialism and individualism, land-owners or capitalists yearning for the old life—all of these had to be identified and confronted. So too were many “enemies” within the Communist Party itself, people who were suspected of opposition to the radical policies of Mao.

Some of these alleged enemies were killed, others imprisoned, and still others—millions of them—were subjected to endless self-criticism sessions or sent down to remote rural areas to “learn from the peasants.” This need to demolish the old society and old values is reflected in Visual Source 21.1, a poster from 1967, the height of the Cultural Revolution (see pp. 1050–51). Its caption reads: “Destroy the Old World; Establish the New World.”

- Notice the various items beneath this young revolutionary’s feet. What do they represent to the ardent revolutionaries seeking to “destroy the



**Visual Source 21.1** Smashing the Old Society (Courtesy, University of Westminster Poster Collection, London)

old world”? What groups of people were most likely to be affected by such efforts?

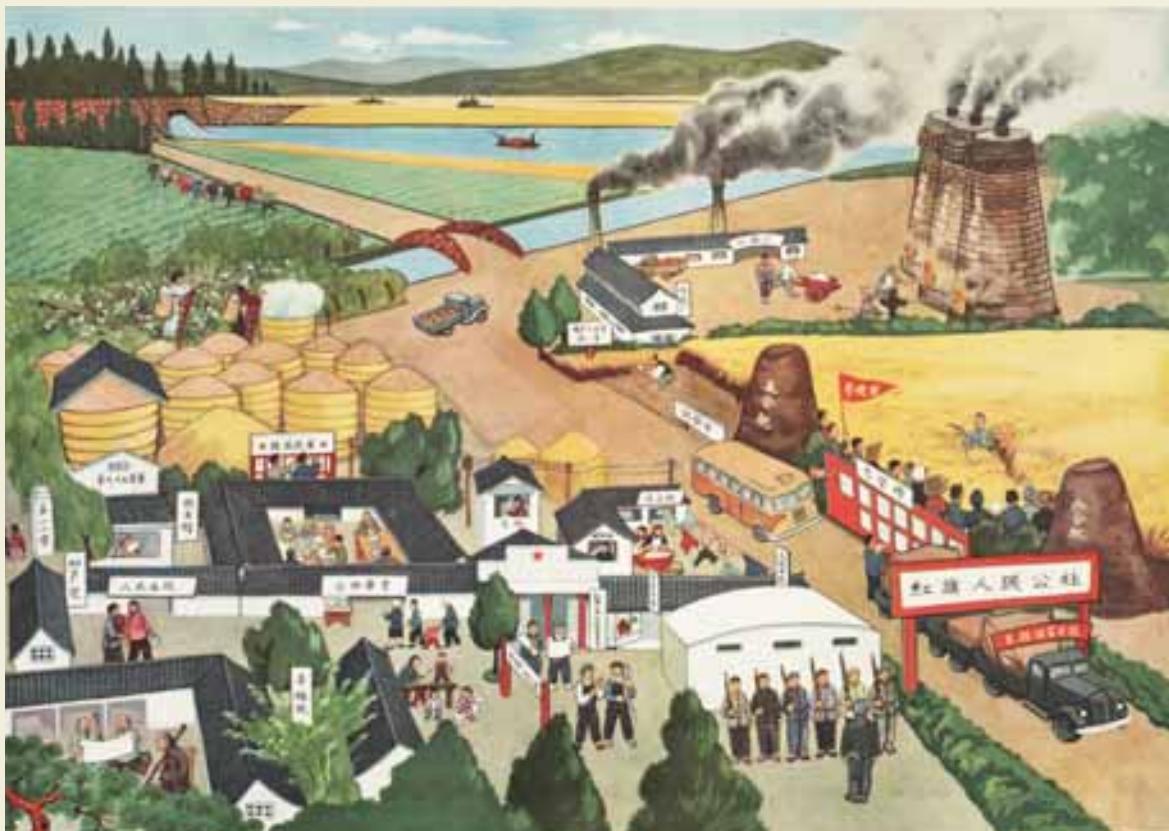
- What elements of a new order are being constructed in this image?
- How does the artist distinguish visually between the old and the new? Note the use of colors and the size of various figures and objects in the poster.

The centerpiece of Mao's plans for the vast Chinese countryside lay in the “people's communes.” Established during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, these were huge political and economic units intended to work the land more efficiently and collectively, to undertake large-scale projects such as building dams and irrigation systems, to create small-scale industries in the rural areas, and to promote local self-reliance. They also sought to move China more rapidly toward genuine communism by eliminating virtually every form of private property and emphasizing social equality and shared living. Commune members ate together in large dining halls, and children were cared for during the day in collective nurseries rather than by their own families. Visual Source 21.2, a poster created in 1958 under the title “The People's Communes Are Good,” shows a highly idealized image of one such commune. See also the celebratory poster on page 1050.

- What appealing features of commune life and a communist future are illustrated in these posters? Notice the communal facilities for eating and washing clothes as well as the drill practice of a “people's militia” unit at the bottom of the picture.
- One of Mao's chief goals was to overcome the sharp division between industrial cities and the agricultural countryside. How is this effort illustrated in these posters?

The actual outcomes of the commune movement departed radically from their idealistic goals. Economic disruption occasioned by the creation of communes contributed a great deal to the enormous famines of the late 1950s, in which many millions perished. Furthermore, efforts to involve the peasants in iron and steel production through the creation of much-heralded “backyard furnaces,” illustrated in this image, proved a failure. Most of the metal produced in these primitive facilities was of poor quality and essentially unusable. Such efforts further impoverished the rural areas as peasants were encouraged to contribute their pots, pans, and anything made of iron to the smelting furnaces.

Among the core values of Maoist communism were human mastery over the natural order, rapid industrialization, and the liberation of women from ancient limitations and oppressions in order to mobilize them for the task of building socialism. Visual Source 21.3, a 1975 poster, illustrates these values. Its caption reads: “Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed.”



**Visual Source 21.2** Building the New Society: The People's Commune (IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger collections  
<http://chineseposters.net>)

- In what ways does this poster reflect Chinese communism's core values?
- How is the young woman in this image portrayed? What does the expression on her face convey? Notice her clothing and the shape of her forearms, and the general absence of a feminine figure. Why do you think she is portrayed in this largely sexless fashion? What does this suggest about the communist attitude toward sexuality?
- What does this image suggest about how the party sought to realize gender equality? What is the significance of the work the young woman is doing?
- Notice the lights that illuminate a nighttime work scene. What does this suggest about attitudes toward work and production?

A central feature of Chinese communism, especially during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, was the growing veneration, even adoration, of Chairman Mao. Portraits, statues, busts, and Mao badges proliferated. Everyone was expected to read repeatedly the “Red Treasured Book,” which offered a selection of quotations from Mao’s writings, believed to facilitate solutions



妇女能顶半边天  
普教山河换新颜

**Visual Source 21.3** Women, Nature, and Industrialization (Courtesy, University of Westminster Poster Collection, London)



我們心中都紅紅的紅太陽和毛主席在一起

Visual Source 21.4 The Cult of Mao (IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger collections <http://chineseposters.net>)

to almost all problems, both public and private. Many families erected “tablets of loyalty” to Mao, much like those previously devoted to ancestors. People made pilgrimages to “sacred shrines” associated with key events in his life. Schoolchildren began the day by chanting, “May Chairman Mao live ten thousand times ten thousand years.”

And Mao was the centerpiece of endless posters. Visual Source 21.4, a poster created in 1968, portrays a familiar scene from the Cultural Revolution. Millions of young people, organized as Red Guards and committed to revolutionary action, flocked to Beijing, where enormous and ecstatic rallies allowed them to catch a glimpse of their beloved leader and to unite with him in the grand task of creating communism in China. The poster’s caption reads: “The reddest, reddest, red sun in our heart, Chairman Mao, and us together.”

- What relationship between Mao and his young followers does the poster suggest? Why might some scholars have seen a quasi-religious dimension to that relationship?
  - How do you understand the significance of the “Red Treasured Book” of quotations from Mao, which the young people are waving?
  - How might you account for the unbridled enthusiasm expressed by the Red Guards? In this case, the poster portrays the realities of these rallies with considerable accuracy. Can you think of other comparable cases of such mass enthusiasm?
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## Using the Evidence: Poster Art in Mao's China

1. **Reading communist intentions:** Based on these visual sources, how would you describe the kind of society that the Chinese Communist Party sought to create in China during Mao's lifetime?
  2. **Distinguishing image and reality:** Based on the narrative of this chapter and especially on what happened after Mao's death, assess the realities that lay behind these visual sources. To what extent do the posters accurately represent the successes of Maoist communism? What insights do they shed on its failures?
  3. **Defining audience and appeal:** To whom do you think these posters were directed? What appeal might they have for the intended audience?
  4. **Noticing change:** How could you use these posters to define the dramatic changes that transformed China since 1949? How might a traditional Chinese official from the nineteenth century respond to them?
  5. **Assessing posters as evidence:** What are the strengths and limitations of poster art for understanding Chinese communism under Mao?
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