How Communism Works

In a perfect world, everyone would have food and shelter, and a true utopian society would be devoid of sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. But for most of the world's population, this perfect society just isn't possible. Communism is one proposed solution to these problems. Simply put, communism is the idea that everyone in a given society receives equal shares of the benefits derived from labor.

Communism is designed to allow the poor to rise up and attain financial and social status equal to that of the middle-class landowners. In order for everyone to achieve equality, wealth is redistributed so that the members of the upper class are brought down to the same financial and social level as the middle class. Communism also requires that all means of production be controlled by the state. In other words, no one can own his or her own business or produce his or her own goods because the state owns everything.

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

Communist Theories and Principles

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

Marx believed that a truly utopian society must be classless and stateless. Marx's main idea was simple: Free the lower class from poverty and give the poor a fighting chance.
Karl Marx, the father of communism

How he believed it should be accomplished, however, was another story. In order to liberate the lower class, Marx believed that the government would have to control all means of production so that no one could outdo anyone else by making more money. Unfortunately, that proves to this day to be more difficult than he might have realized.

(It should be noted that Marx died well before any of his theories were put to the test.)

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

Phase 1: A revolution must take place in order to overthrow the existing government. Marx emphasized the need for total destruction of the existing system in order to move on to Phase 2.

Phase 2: A dictator or elite leader (or leaders) must gain absolute control over the proletariat (working class). During this phase, the new government exerts absolute control over the common citizen’s personal choices -- including his or her education, religion, employment and even marriage. Collectivization of property and wealth must also take place.

Phase 3: Achievement of utopia. This phase has never been attained because it requires that all non-communists be destroyed in order for the Communist Party to achieve supreme equality.

In a Marxist utopia, everyone would happily share property and wealth, free from the restrictions that class-based systems require. The government would control all means of production so that the one-class system would remain constant, with no possibility of any middle class citizens rising back to the top.

Marx also gave other essential principles of communism, such as:

- Government controlled education
- Government controlled labor
- Government ownership of transportation and
- Government control of communication vehicles (i.e. the media)
- Government ownership of agricultural means and factories
- No ownership of private property
- Heavy income tax on everyone
- Elimination of rights of inheritance
In the communist society that Marx described, the government has supreme authority through its total control of land and means of production. Because the government distributes land and property among the people, communism sets a standard of equality -- both economically and socially -- among its followers.

The system seems to work in theory, but how did communism work in practice?

**Rise of the First Communist Nation**

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

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

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

**The Bolshevik Revolution**

When Czar Nicholas was dethroned in 1917, Vladimir Lenin was in exile in Switzerland for playing a part in some previous anti-czar plots. When he heard of the uprising, Lenin cut a deal with Germany. If the Germans could transport him home, he would get Russia to back out of World War I. The Germans agreed and snuck him back in to Petrograd through a railway car.

The Communist Party was about to gather more steam. **Leon Trotsky**, a Russian revolutionary who had escaped from prison and fled to America, returned to Russia to serve as Lenin's right-hand man. Trotsky is largely credited for engineering the **Bolshevik Revolution**.

Because the **Russian Provisional Government** supported the war effort, it didn't last very long. Many people shifted loyalties to the **Bolsheviks**, Lenin's pro-Communism party, which opposed the war. When the revolution struck, the Bolsheviks used this momentum to overthrow the Provisional Government. Lenin's Red Guard took control of the Winter Palace (former home of the czar and later the Provisional Government's headquarters), effectively overturning the Provisional Government. And true to his word, Lenin pulled Russia out of the war.

But some Russians still weren't too sure about the Bolsheviks. Lenin endeavored to gain support by broadcasting slogans such as "Bread, Land, Peace and All Power to the Soviets." To people suffering from famine, this promise hit the spot. Yet in elections for the **Russian Constituent Assembly** in late
November 1917, only a quarter of voters cast ballots for the Bolsheviks. Lenin overturned the results and sent armed guards to prevent meetings of the democratic assembly. This made it virtually impossible for the Russian people to voice their concerns in a democratic way.

The years from 1917 to 1920 became known as "war communism" due to the methods the Bolsheviks used to push their political agenda. In 1918, the party was renamed the Russian Communist Party. Lenin and his communist cohorts endeavored to put Marx's tenets of belief into practice. This marked the beginning of the Russian Civil War, which lasted from 1918 until 1922. When the war ended, the Soviet Union formed -- also known as the U.S.S.R., the Soviet Union included Russia and 15 bordering states.

Lenin was aware that the upper class wouldn't willingly give up land or wealth, so he created the New Economic Policy (NEP) to legislate redistributing land -- taking it from the nobility and giving it to the poor. Upholding the necessary phases that Marx outlined, Lenin initiated the Red Terror, a threatening fear campaign led by the Bolsheviks. His goal was mass murder, which he accomplished through three main methods.

- **Man-made famine** was Lenin's most successful tool. He knew that if he could break the peasantry, he'd have full control. Lenin engineered famines by requiring peasants to sell their crops to him at virtually no profit, using the rationale that he needed the crops to support his army. The peasantry was so indignant that they reduced crop production drastically, leading to a full-scale civil war. The exact numbers vary, but tens of millions of people starved and millions died.

- Lenin also instituted **slave labor camps**. Anyone who disagreed with Lenin's rule was sent to work at one of these camps, where millions more suffered and died.

- And, he executed his detractors to silence their voices. During the Red Terror, hundreds of thousands of detractors were put to death. Victims included members of the bourgeoisie, White Army prisoners of war, socialists, Czarist sympathizers and innocent civilians.
Stalin's Reign and Successive Dictators

When Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin came into power and managed to target one of the only groups that Lenin never did: fellow communists. In Stalin's eyes, anyone who didn't back him 100 percent was an enemy. He purged many members of the Communist Party for a range of crimes, including treason, political deviations and espionage. When all was said and done, Stalin ordered the deaths of nearly all of his Bolshevik comrades, including Trotsky.

Stalin took Lenin's methods of terrorizing the people a few steps further. Whereas Lenin let people starve to death, Stalin used famine to further his political goals. He took back the land that Lenin had turned over to the peasants through the New Economic Policy and forced collectivization of agriculture in the U.S.S.R. The peasants resisted and crop production diminished even more than during Lenin's reign. Widespread famine continue to kill millions of people, and during the Great Terror of 1936-1939, Stalin ordered the executions of millions more.

Stalin wanted to take communism worldwide. He knew that in order to do so, he would have to industrialize Russia. Stalin built factories in strategic places so they would not be vulnerable to outside enemies. He built so many so quickly that Russia soon surpassed many other major countries in industry. His legacy continued well after his death.

(At a rally marking Stalin's 128th birthday anniversary on Dec. 21, 2007, a man holds a portrait of the Soviet dictator.)

Several other dictators came into power after Stalin's death, including Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. The Soviet people continued to perish at an alarming rate. From 1953 to 1991, people were put to death for political offenses, and as recently as the 1980s, slave labor camps were still inhabited by detractors.

While communist theory and practice was alive and well in some parts of the world, other nations strived to contain the movement.
The Fall of the Soviet Union

The Cold War ultimately brought the Soviet Union down, but it took nearly half a century to accomplish this goal. In 1945, around the end of WWII, the Soviet Union and United States waged this war of threatening words and fear. The Cold War was a top concern on the international affairs front. From communism opponents' perspective, its purpose was to contain communism and avoid nuclear conflict. But the Soviet Union aimed to spread communism to the United States, if not the rest of the world.

These two powerhouses disagreed over political, cultural and economic differences. The United States began developing retaliatory weapons, should the need to use them arise. These weapons were called the Strategic Triad and included long-range bombers, submarines and land-based missiles. This led to the first nuclear arms race, during which the two governments stockpiled as many nuclear weapons as they could in order to keep the other government in line. Luckily, nuclear war was avoided, in large part due to the scare tactics of the Cold War.

In the 1950s, the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in the space race. Both countries wanted to be the first in space for a myriad of reasons, particularly because their defense and military capabilities stood to benefit from a successful space program. The space race was fueled by the ever-intensifying rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union won that contest by launching the satellite Sputnik into orbit on Oct. 4, 1957. But the U.S. was the first country to successfully land on the moon.

The tension between the United States and the Soviet Union wasn't just restricted to the nuclear arms race and space race. Many Cold War-related crises erupted over the years, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Soviet Union's arms race, space race and continued support of the communist regime (all of which cost a lot of money) resulted in a stagnant economy with virtually no growth. When Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed to the presidency of the Communist Party in 1985, he became an advocate of change. Gorbachev laid his goals out: rejuvenate the long-lagging economy and accelerate economic development.
He worked with President Ronald Reagan and the United States government to come to terms with the arms and policy disagreements that had escalated over the years. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union improved rapidly. In 1989, Gorbachev and President George H.W. Bush declared an end to the Cold War. That same year marked the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, signifying the end of communism in East Germany. The communist governments in Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria also fell in December 1989.

In 1990, Russia elected Boris Yeltsin to the presidency. The Soviet Union officially came to an end in 1991 and split into republics (a system of government in which an elected official leads): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. These republics are self-governed, rather than ruled by the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union dissolved, it led to a domino effect of communist nations collapsing.

The Spread of Communism

Communism wasn't contained inside the Soviet Union. As Marx's tenets had instructed, it had to spread worldwide to achieve utopia. Some countries had adopted communism to help realize that goal, including:

- Warsaw Pact Nations: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and Hungary (communist from about 1945 to 1991). The Warsaw Pact was a military treaty signed by these countries and Russia. In short, it guaranteed that they would come to each other's aid if targeted by another country.
- Yugoslavia (1945 - 1992)
- North Vietnam (1954 - 1976, although still technically communist following the unification of Vietnam)
- Yemen (1969 - 1990)
- Cambodia (1975 - 1989)

It's interesting to note that the communist governments in all of these countries (except North Vietnam) collapsed right around the same time as the Soviet Union, which was a huge support to the smaller countries.

If Stalin had his way, communism would have become much more widespread, especially in the West. In the 1930s, he enacted a plan to overtake this region with furious industrial development. His hope was that Russia would become such a military powerhouse that it would stand up to the other powerful nations, especially the United States. His efforts fell short, and as we've learned, the Soviet Union slowly fell apart due to these economic disadvantages. However, communism does have a presence in the United States today. The Communist Party USA supports political candidates in local elections. In fact, the group has even supported a presidential candidate as recently as 1984. The group advocates the end of the working class's exploitation and oppression. Ultimately, the party hopes to implement a socialist society where all people will benefit from the wealth present in the United States.

Communism also rose to power in the following nations, where it is still alive today:
- China (since 1949)
- Cuba (since 1959)
- Vietnam (since 1976)
- North Korea (since 1948)
- Laos (since 1975)
Home to more than 20 percent of the world’s population (1.3 billion people), China is one of the world’s most prominent communist governments. Mao Zedong, China’s dictator, launched and raise the communist government in China, employing many of Stalin’s tactics.

In addition to the death camps Mao instituted to combat Chinese counter-revolutionaries, he also developed a plan called the Great Leap Forward, which forced collectivization of agriculture. Peasants were ushered into communes when Mao seized their property. They were forced into slave labor, and personal ties they had to their families and former lives were severed. Mao also forced mass industrialization, which, coupled with the extremes of forced agricultural collectivization, killed somewhere around 16.5 million to 40 million Chinese from 1957 to 1961. He also ordered the executions of Communist Party members during his tenure [source: University of Chicago Chronicle].

Today, China’s government encourages capitalist ventures, which has resulted in a greatly improved economy. China boasts a huge manufacturing industry, churning out toys, furniture, electronics and other products. Despite these gains, the government remains extremely dictatorial in nature, exerting authority over censorship and other basic civil liberties. In fact, China is under pressure to improve human rights conditions before Beijing hosts the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. When China won the bid, the government promised to reform human rights violations. However, the country continues to execute more prisoners than any other country. Human rights activists are regularly harassed, prisoners are detained without a trial and censorship abounds [source: Amnesty International].

Symbols of Communism - The main ideal of communism is expressed through the symbols chosen to represent the movement. The hammer and the sickle (a farming tool with a hooked blade used to cut grain) are the two main party symbols. The tools are representative of the industrial and agricultural workers, respectively, and the combination of the tools illustrates the harmony of the two groups working as equals.