

Communism

By: National Geographic Education

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 Communism is a form of government most frequently associated with the ideas of Karl Marx, a German philosopher who outlined his ideas for a utopian society in *The Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848. Marx believed that capitalism, with its emphasis on profit and private ownership, led to inequality among citizens. Thus, his goal was to encourage a system that promoted a classless society in which everyone shared the benefits of labor and the state government controlled all property and wealth. No one would strive to rise above others, and people would no longer be motivated by greed. Then, communism would close the gap between rich and poor, end the exploitation of workers, and free the poor from oppression.
- 2 While the basic ideas of communism did not originate with Marx, he developed them into a popular doctrine, which was later propelled into practice. Marx's ideal society ensured economic equality and fairness. Marx believed that private ownership of property promoted greed, and he blamed capitalism for society's problems. The problems, he claimed, stemmed from the Industrial Revolution. The rise of factories, the reliance on machines, and the capability of mass production created conditions that promoted oppression and encouraged the development of a proletariat, or a working class.
- 3 Simply put, in a capitalist system, the factories fueled the economy, and a wealthy few owned the factories. This created the need for a large number of people to work for the factory owners. In this environment, the wealthy few exploited the laborers, who had to labor in order to live. So, Marx outlined his plan to liberate the proletariat, or to free them of the burden of labor. His idea of utopia was a land where people labored as they were able, and everyone shared the wealth.
- 4 If the government controlled the economy and the people relinquished their property to the state, no single group of people could rise above another. Marx described this ideal in his *Manifesto*, but the practice of communism fell far short of the ideal. For a large part of the 20th century, about one-third of the world lived in communist countries—countries ruled by dictatorial leaders who controlled the lives of everyone else. The communist leaders set the wages, they set the prices, and they distributed the wealth. Western capitalist nations fought hard against communism, and eventually, most communist countries collapsed. Marx's utopia was never achieved, as it required revolution on a global scale, which never came to pass. However, as of 2020, five proclaimed communist countries continue to exist: North Korea, Vietnam, China, Cuba, and Laos.