Learning Targets

• To examine the nature of the Russian and Chinese revolutions and how the differences between those revolutions affected the introduction of communist regimes in those countries
• To consider how communist states developed, especially in the USSR and the People’s Republic of China
• To consider the benefits of a communist state
• To consider the harm caused by the two great communist states of the twentieth century
• To introduce students to the cold war and its major issues
• To explore the reasons why communism collapsed in the USSR and China
• To consider how we might assess the communist experience and to inquire if historians should be asking such questions about moral judgment

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

Margin Review Questions

1. When and where did communism exercise influence during the twentieth century?
2. Identify the major differences between the Russian and Chinese revolutions.
3. Why were the Bolsheviks able to ride the Russian Revolution to power?
4. What was the appeal of communism in China before 1949?
5. What changes did communist regimes bring to the lives of women?
6. How did the collectivization of agriculture differ between the USSR and China?
7. What were the achievements of communist efforts at industrialization? What problems did these achievements generate?
8. Why did communist regimes generate terror and violence on such a massive scale?
9. In what different ways was the cold war expressed?
10. In what ways did the United States play a global role after World War II?
11. Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the communist world by the 1970s.
12. What explains the rapid end of the communist era?
13. How did the end of communism in the Soviet Union differ from communism’s demise in China?

Key Terms

Anna Dubova: Born to a Russian peasant family in 1916 she lived through the communist experience of her country. Her life illustrates the complexities that ordinary citizens faced as they sought to navigate the communist system. (pron. An-uh Du-BO-buh)

Bolsheviks: Russian revolutionary party led by Vladimir Lenin and later renamed the Communist Party; the name Bolshevik means “the majority.” (pron. BOWL-sheh-vik)

building socialism: Euphemistic expression for the often-forceful transformation of society when a communist regime came to power in a state.

Chinese Revolution: Long revolutionary process in the period 1912–1949 that began with the overthrow of the Chinese imperial system and ended with the triumph of the Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Zedong.
collectivization: Process of rural reform undertaken by the communist leadership of both the USSR and China in which private property rights were abolished and peasants were forced onto larger and more industrialized farms to work and share the proceeds as a community rather than as individuals.

Cuban missile crisis: Major standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1962 over Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba; the confrontation ended in compromise, with the USSR removing its missiles in exchange for the United States agreeing not to invade Cuba.

Cultural Revolution: China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a massive campaign launched by Mao Zedong in the mid-1960s to combat the capitalist tendencies that he believed reached into even the highest ranks of the Communist Party; the campaign threw China into chaos.

Deng Xiaoping: Leader of China from 1976 to 1997 whose reforms essentially dismantled the communist elements of the Chinese economy. (pron. dung shee-yao-ping)

Mikhail Gorbachev: Leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 whose efforts to reform the USSR led to its collapse. (pron. MEE-ka-eel GORE-bah-CHOF)

Great Purges/Terror: Also called the Terror, the Great Purges of the late 1930s were a massive attempt to cleanse the Soviet Union of supposed “enemies of the people”; nearly a million people were executed between 1936 and 1941, and 4 million or 5 million more were sentenced to forced labor in the gulag.

glasnost: Gorbachev’s reform policy of openness, which permitted an unprecedented range of cultural and intellectual freedoms. Far from strengthening socialism and reviving a stagnant Soviet Union, the reforms led to its further weakening and collapse. A democracy movement of unofficial groups and parties 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. Furthermore, a multitude of nationalist movements used the new freedoms to insist on greater autonomy, or even independence, from the Soviet Union.

Guomindang: The Chinese Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek from 1928 until its overthrow by the communists in 1949. (pron. gwo-mindong)

Nikita Khrushchev: Leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964. (pron. ni-KEE-tah KROOSH-chef)

Mao Zedong: Chairman of China’s Communist Party and de facto ruler of China from 1949 until his death in 1976. (pron. maow dzuh-dong)

perestroika: Bold economic program launched in 1987 by Mikhail Gorbachev with the intention of freeing up Soviet industry and businesses. (pron. pe-rih-STROY-kuh)

Russian Revolution: Massive revolutionary upheaval in 1917 that overthrew the Romanov dynasty in Russia and ended with the seizure of power by communists under the leadership of Lenin.

Stalin: Name assumed by Joseph Vissarionovich Jugashvili (1878–1953), leader of the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death; “Stalin” means “made of steel.”

Zhenotdel: Women’s Department of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union from 1919 to 1930; Zhenotdel worked strongly to promote equality for women. (pron. zen-OHT-del)